



DON BOSCO

# THE CATECHIST

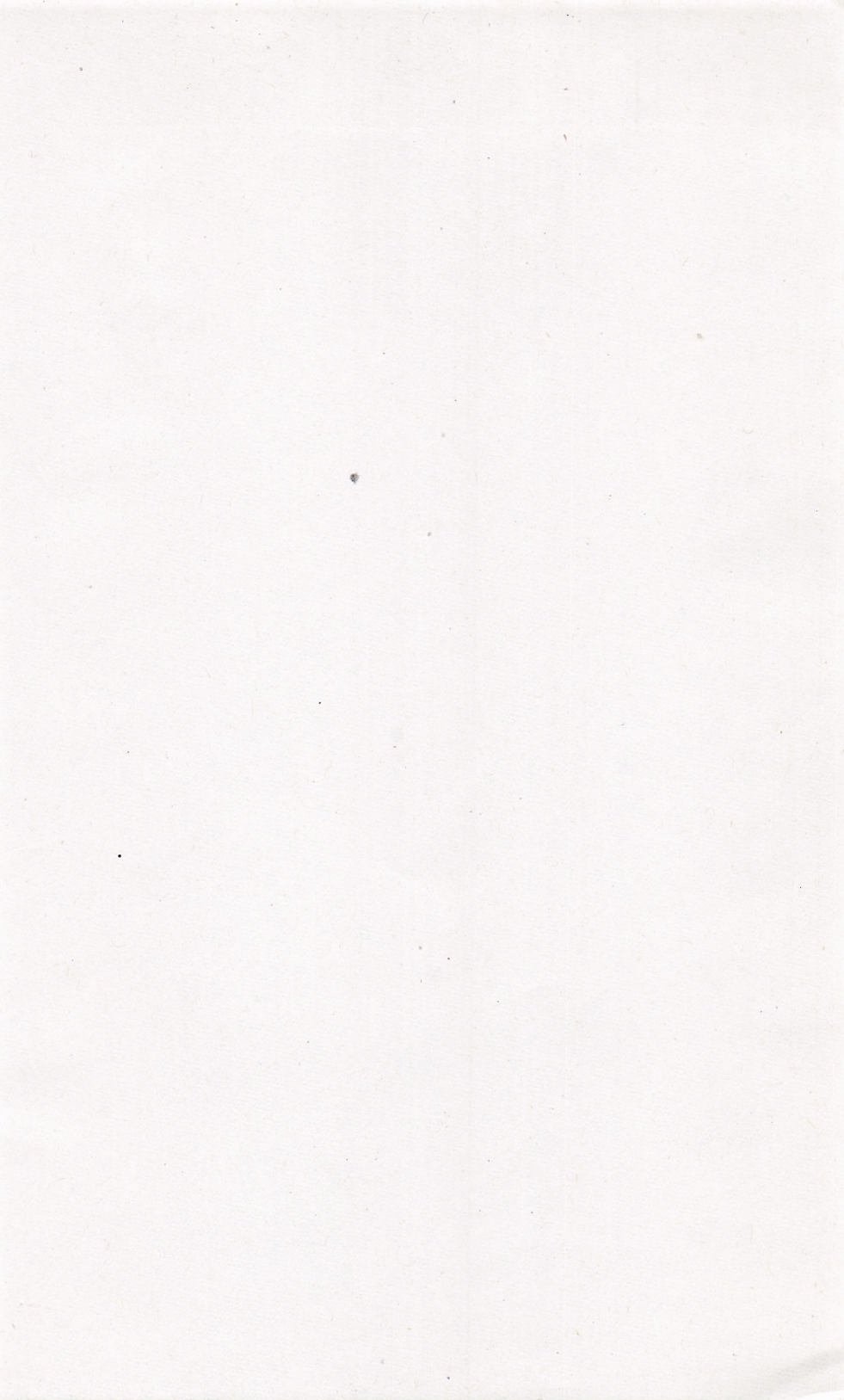
GIAN CARLO ISOARDI

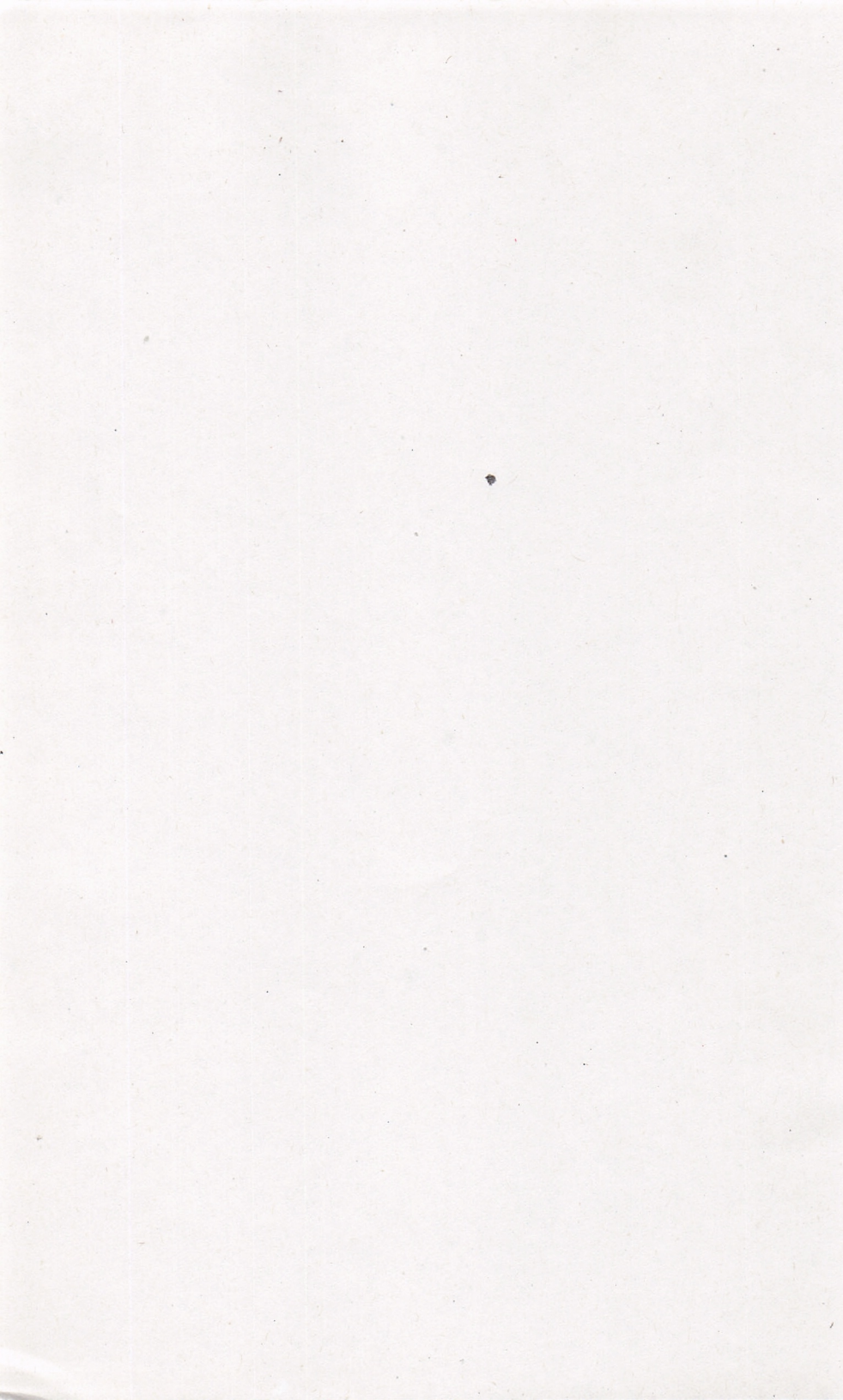


DON BOSCO PUBLICATIONS











# DON BOSCO THE CATECHIST

by

**Gian Carlo Isoardi, S.D.B.**

Translated by

**Wallace L. Cornell, S.D.B.**

© Copyright 1981 Don Bosco Publications

ISBN 0-89944-053-3

Copyright 1987

Don Bosco Publications

New Rochelle, New York

Reproduced with Permission by

Salesiana Publishers, Inc.

Pasay Road, Makati, Metro-Manila

Philippines

Asian Edition

DON BOSCO PUBLICATIONS

New Rochelle, New York

Printed in the Philippines

## INDEX

page

### *Introduction:*

Don Bosco and the Young: Two Constants.....	1
---	---

### *Chapter One:*

Don Bosco, the Catechist .....	1
What it meant to Don Bosco to teach catechism .....	2
The salvation of souls, the sole motivation force of Don Bosco's catechesis. ....	3
The defence and the diffusion of the Catholic faith .....	6
A wider range of catechetics .....	9
Don Bosco gets down to the work of catechesis. ....	11
Those being catechized. ....	12
The catechists. ....	13
The text .....	14
Don Bosco's catechetical method .....	15
"Active research" in Don Bosco's catechesis. ....	19
Ways and means of attracting young people .....	20

### *Chapter Two:*

The Proclamation of the Word of God .....	
Catechesis in Action .....	23
Catechesis of the Last Things. ....	26
Death .....	26
Heaven .....	28
Catechesis of sin .....	28
The "Good Night". ....	30
Catechesis of the playground. ....	33
A "glance". ....	34
A word in the ear .....	34



*Chapter Three:*

<b>Don Bosco's Catechesis as a Writer</b> .....	37
Church history .....	41
Bible history .....	42
Letter writing .....	44
Don Bosco, the journalist .....	45

*Chapter Four:*

<b>The Catechetical-Penitential Work of Don Bosco</b> .....	47
Centrality of confession .....	48
A life commitment .....	52
A regular confessor .....	59
Spiritual direction .....	60

*Chapter Five:*

<b>The Eucharistic Catechesis of Don Bosco</b> .....	67
Liberty as regards Holy Communion .....	70
Personal commitment in Holy Communion .....	71
Christ, a friend .....	72
Visits to the Blessed Sacrament .....	74
The Mass, the centre of all Don Bosco's catechesis .....	75

*Chapter Six:*

<b>Marian Catechesis of Don Bosco</b> .....	79
---	----

*Conclusion:*

<b>Elements of Actuality</b>	
in Don Bosco's Pastoral Catechesis .....	85

## Introduction

### Don Bosco and the Young:

#### Two Constants

"My young friends, you are very dear to me. It is enough for me to know that you are young, to become interested in your welfare." Don Bosco wrote these words in the introduction to the *Companion of Youth* and thus gave us an intimate glance into his world as a young priest. It is a clear statement of what he felt was the essence of his priesthood.

This dedication to boys was the fruit of a deliberate choice which Don Bosco made as a newly-ordained priest when he was faced with the choice of working exclusively for the girls of the Marchesa Barolo's Institute or work for boys and fend for himself. His decision was made without any real hesitation. He knew full well that the noble lady could easily find a replacement for him as he also knew that those boys he had gathered together from the streets would not be so lucky.

John Bosco, from his childhood, set out to help his companions over whom he felt he had quite an influence. Fr. Lemoyne notes in the first volume of the *Biographical Memoirs* that "the thought of spending his life among boys, of teaching them their religion . . . had been with him since the age of five" (MB I,109).

With that openness and sincerity to which he had been educated, he put forth to his mother what he felt to be his life's programme: to consecrate his life to young people.



"I want to study because I want to give my whole life to the care of young boys" (MB I,187).

He was not discouraged by the distant attitude of the priests he met as a boy. He felt disappointed and sad at this attitude and posed the question to his mother: "Would it be so hard for them to stop a couple of minutes and say a few words to me?" (MB I,170). However, his optimistic nature did not allow him to waste time in useless laments. "If I ever become a priest, I will give my whole life to youngsters. They'll never see me looking stern and forbidding. I'll always be the first to speak to them" (MB I,170).

Typical is the conversation between John and the seminarian Cafasso at the Chieri Fair. Although attracted by the noise and the activity of a country fair, by the acrobats and the side-shows, he was still able to spell out his future mission in the clearest of terms: to dedicate himself to young people. He was to repeat this two years before his death, speaking to the senior boys of the Oratory: "Don Bosco always loved to be with young people" (MB XVIII,18).

As a seminarian at Chieri, this desire and this thought were always uppermost in his mind—his dream was about to become a reality. His one desire was to be a priest as quickly as possible to be with the young, to get to know them, to watch over them. Read, for example, the beginning of Chapter 43 of the *Biographical Memoirs*.

He dedicated the first months of his priesthood to teaching catechism to children, setting up close bonds of friendship with them. He was to say later on: "I knew them all by name." The love was mutual—all his life he was able to count upon their collaboration and sincere affection. One cannot read the statements of his first boys without being moved. Here are two of them: "The food was not wonderful. Thinking about what we ate and how we slept, I cannot help wondering how we put up with it, without complaining. But we were happy because we were loved" (Canon Ballesio).

The second is very terse but says a lot: "Don Bosco was everything for us" (Fr. Nai). This love for young people continued throughout his life. It was emphasised as Don Bosco's death drew near when he revealed all that tenderness and loving concern that had characterized his whole life. As he lay dying, the thought of his young friends kept



coming back to him. Bro. Enria describes Don Bosco in 1887 at the College at Lanza. "He kept looking towards Turin and saying: that is where my boys are" (MB XVIII,369).

A few days before his death he confessed, in all simplicity, to his Salesians, most of whom had been with him since they were boys, that the only remorse he felt at the approach of death was that he would have to leave them.

From that first generous resolution made when he was quite young to consecrate himself entirely to the service of the young, right up until the last message for his boys ("Tell them I will be waiting for them in heaven"), Don Bosco's life was one of total dedication to the young.



## *Chapter One*

### **Don Bosco, the Catechist**

Let us get straight down to the essence of St. John Bosco's apostolate. This will not only be a matter of examining his catechetical methods but also all his pastoral activity, understood as the proclamation of the plan of salvation with which all are asked to co-operate generously. Our study of his catechesis, therefore, will not simply be a matter of getting to know "how Don Bosco taught catechism" but will cover all those values which this wonderful educator stressed in order to realize a complete catechesis. Whilst it saw to the spirit it did not neglect the body; whilst drawing on the eternal values and truths, it knew how to adapt and translate them to meet individual needs.

We will cover, therefore, in the study of Don Bosco's catechesis all that he did to promote the good of his boys: his religious ideas, the pedagogical ideas that inspired him, the concern that directed all his work as well as the various activities that made real and living the divine message he sought to impart.

Don Bosco was a catechist when he was preaching just as much as when he was writing a letter; when he was travelling just as much as when he was hearing confessions; when he was being given triumphant welcomes in Paris just as much as when he was on the receiving end of an Archbishop's humiliations; just as much as he was being received in an audience with the Pope as when he waited patiently in the waiting rooms of government ministers; just as when he sent



his missionary sons to far-flung Patagonia as when, on his deathbed, he re-affirmed his granite fidelity to the Holy Father.

Don Bosco was a catechist when he took the boys from the General Reformatory for a day's outing as when he addressed his fatherly words to the boys after Night Prayers.

He was a catechist when, amidst a thousand and one difficulties, he founded the Salesian Society as when, some years before, he was mocked, opposed, feared and spied upon as he led his boys through the streets of Turin.

### What it meant to Don Bosco to teach catechism

In 1868 when the saint was trying to obtain from the neighbouring bishops the support needed to have the Salesian Society approved he enclosed with his letters of request a short historical sketch of his work from its very beginnings. The description began with this short statement: "This Society had at its very beginning a catechism lesson." To teach catechism for Don Bosco was not the same as having certain formulae learnt by heart. His catechesis was aimed at the essentials: to teach catechism, for him, was to present God as very close to the heart of the young—it was to bring the child closer to God.

Catechesis, for Don Bosco, was a matter of convictions, of positive and concrete faith. He was not satisfied in arousing in the adolescent a bit of vain and sterile sentimentalism but aimed at breaking through with all the force, the freshness, the novelty and the deep revolutionary aspect of Christianity.

Don Bosco had no time for a catechesis given in any old improvised way, a catechesis that made no demands. His deep concern for the proper teaching of catechism made him avoid classes that lacked life, that were flat and formless, that consisted of a few theoretical notions, a few odd thoughts to be memorized. His concern for a serious and solid catechesis, one that satisfied the real needs of the young, can be seen in his characteristic talks after Night Prayers. (Read, for example, *MB V*, 365-366.)



In this light it is easy to understand the directives given by him to all teachers in his Houses, namely "to have the students study the diocesan catechism every year in its entirety" (*MB X,27*).

This is "teaching catechism" in the mind of Don Bosco: to bring young people to love Christ and to realize that they have, in Him, a very close Friend.

Catechism, understood in this sense, was the essence of Don Bosco's apostolate and that which made it such a fruitful one.

### **The salvation of souls, the sole motivation force of Don Bosco's catechesis**

The catechetical-pastoral motivating force that dominated Don Bosco's life finds its concrete expression in a phrase that is typically his: to work for the "salvation of souls."

Always ahead of his times ("in those things that concern needy youth or the salvation of souls, I run ahead even to the extent of being foolhardy" *MB XIV,662*), courageously refusing to take a rest, ready to give up only "when the devil has stopped ensnaring souls" (*MB VI,343*), Don Bosco always kept up a constructive and real dialogue with young people, elaborating a plan based on a common interest. "I have something very important to tell you. I want you to help me in a matter that I have very much at heart: your eternal salvation. This is not only the main reason—it is the only reason—why I am here. Without your help, however, I can do nothing. We must be of one mind in this and real friendship and mutual confidence must unite us" (*MB VII, 303*).

His catechetics followed a well thought-out plan of action, it had as its roots, not only the absolute primacy of the study of the catechism ("with Don Bosco the study of religion always ranked first" *MB III,146*) but, as comes through with almost monotonous regularity in his writings and conferences, he was convinced that "man is successful in this world if he saves his soul and is very knowledgeable if he knows the science of salvation; but he is a total failure if he loses his soul and knows nothing if he is ignorant of



those things that can assure him of eternal salvation.” (*The Jubilee and Devotional Practices*.) This concept was taken up four years later in another writing, *The Month of May*. The thoughts are identical but the style is more polished, the tone warmer and more insistent: “The salvation of one’s soul is a very important matter, it is the only important matter; if one makes a mistake here it is an eternal mistake. If one loses a court case, he can appeal to another tribunal or seek another judgement. If one’s health is poor, there is always hope that doctors can find a cure. If you make a bad contract, there is always a chance of recouping that. If hail destroys one year’s harvest, you can always hope for better luck next year. But if, unfortunately, one makes a mistake in this matter of eternal salvation, all is lost forever. A soul once lost is always lost.” If the salvation of souls was the remote motivating force of his catechetics, the approximate and concrete motive was to make of his boys “good christians and honest citizens.”

He planned on a solid basis of a healthy christian humanism. His catechetical vision grew out of a positive understanding of the boy, based on his great love for him and his own unique experience. When Don Bosco thought of a boy he avoided both extremes of considering him an angel or a mere animal. He allowed himself to be influenced by both the natural and the supernatural but both under a single vision. All—it is true—is seen as a function of the spirit; nothing, however, is considered extraneous except the offense of God.

Fr. Braido comments: “Body and soul, society and the individual, physical life and culture: all this is taken into consideration by this robust and catholic educational concept.” (*The Preventive System*, page 123.) On the other hand, Don Bosco was not a fatalist. The theory of predestination of his seminary days was completely put aside in favour of a real yet mysterious interdependence of God’s grace and man’s collaboration. A sentence written when he was already a mature man could be disconcerting at first sight but, on examination, it really reveals a very deep and exact theological thought. He wrote: “One’s bodily health is in the hands of God but the health of one’s soul is in the hands of the individual” (*MB XIV*, 653).



The collaboration of man with grace is fundamental. There can be no salvation without a free and responsible choice.

Don Bosco did not stop here. As soon as he succeeded in getting a young person working towards the salvation of his own soul then he got him to help others to do the same. His was a christianity of attack; for him, a christianity that is only interested in some sporadic attempt to ensure one's own salvation only is a failure from the outset. His "*Salve, salvando, salvati*" is not just a play on words—it synthesises his whole concept of the apostolate.

Personally convinced that "there is nothing more holy in this world than to work for the good of souls, for whose salvation Jesus Christ poured out the last drops of his blood" (*Life of Dominic Savio*), he asked his boys to help each other to save their souls. The invitation did not fail to gain a response. It was the better type of boy who best understood this and seriously set to work to make this a reality. In his biography of *Dominic Savio*, Don Bosco notes with a great deal of pleasure: "Some of the lads at the Oratory, out of love for their companions, joined together into a kind of society aimed at the pastoral care of the more troublesome. Savio belonged to this and was one of its most zealous members." Of this lad he was also to say: "The thought of saving souls for God was never out of his mind."

The same Savio, in a serious conversation with one of his companions, gave several reasons for his apostolic zeal in "saving souls":

- *my companion's soul has been redeemed by Jesus Christ;*
- *we are all brothers and so we must love each other's souls;*
- *God urges us to help each other;*
- *If I manage to save one soul I also ensure the salvation of my own.*

These are real theological motives: redemption is seen in the light of a common salvation but one that must also be gained individually. This conversation, which Don Bosco reports in his life of Dominic, was most probably reconstructed because we find the same arguments being used by Don Bosco in his *pañegyric* on St. Philip Neri preached at



Alba in 1868. But this is not important. What is of interest is the fact that this book, written with clear pedagogical and catechetical intent, circulated widely both within and outside the Oratory. For example, Francis Besucco had read this life before he met Don Bosco.

It is quite evident, then, that the thoughts expressed were recurring ones in Don Bosco's catechesis and were very familiar to the boys. What strikes us most in Don Bosco's catechesis was his absolute fidelity to a precise programme: that of working for souls and nothing else.

### **The defence and the diffusion of the Catholic faith**

Don Bosco's grave concern for catechetics which urged him "to seek souls and leave all else aside" also inspired him to battle in defense of the faith menaced by protestantism and sectarian hatred, by a liberalism which was, at times, subtle and, at other times, openly hostile. To this was added a slow but progressive falling away of the masses from the Church, especially among the working classes.

Without giving way at all or keeping silent when he should have spoken, Don Bosco, either when speaking or writing, always proclaimed the immutable principles of the catholic faith. Without ambiguous interpretations, and even with a very outright apologetics which allowed no discussion, Don Bosco set himself up as the zealous defender of catholic orthodoxy.

In this area of Don Bosco's catechetical apostolate we may note two distinct steps: he passed from a simple defence of the catholic faith against the disorders of his day to a well-mounted apostolate for the spread of true religion, to which he devoted all his priestly ministry. The defence of the catholic faith inspired Don Bosco to reach as wide an audience as possible. His biographer could well say that "religious instruction flourished at the Oratory." And if, in 1870, the Minister Correnti ordered his Inspectors and Councils to see that religious instruction was given only to those students who expressly requested it, Don Bosco was not discouraged nor did he stand by, helpless. He worked at "opposing any negative response by teaching catechism in his schools and



in his churches every Sunday." Don Bosco never wavered from his catholic-Roman belief. Yet these were times of great tension, of a delicate and precarious balance, "difficult times" in which, as the Minister Farini noted "a fly could take on the dimensions of a camel" (MB VI,392). In a discussion with Cavour in 1860 Don Bosco had bluntly stated, "In matters of religion I stand with the Pope and, as a good catholic, I intend to stand with him until death" (MB VI, 390).

So as to give his boys a solid religious formation Don Bosco had, as early as 1847, prepared a prayer book "adapted to the needs of the young, able to give them the main religious ideas, based on the Bible and which explained the fundamental concepts of the catholic religion briefly and clearly." This was the *Il giovane provveduto* or *Companion of Youth*. The saint's intention was specifically catechetical. He wanted to teach his boys a way of christian life "which will enable you to be the joy of your parents and an honour to your country by making you good citizens here on earth and one day blessed inhabitants of heaven." As regards this book it has been well written: "He who wants to write the history of religious ideas and worship in Italy in the last century could not disregard this book which by avoiding both the rigorous exuberances of Jansenism on the one hand and sentimentalism on the other, speaks to the heart and refers back to the pure founts of christian life, educates to the frequentation of the sacraments. All this with criteria all would be tempted to call new if they were not, instead, a prudent return to the old classical discipline" (Fr. S. Colombo: *St. John Bosco*).

*Il giovane provveduto* was an immediate success. Two editions in one year. Whilst Don Bosco was still alive it went through 122 editions, each of about 5,000 copies. Over and above the 610,000 thus printed, there were numerous editions after his death. A well conceived book that "found its way into every kind of school, into every factory, into every christian family and did so much to promote piety and conserve the faith among the people" (MB III,9).

The words with which Don Bosco put this book into the hands of the young form a hymn of sincere love for them.



At the same time it shows his priestly anxiety to educate, advise and protect them from the many errors around them, those young people who were the object of the special love of God.

He begins by unmasking "two special ways by which the devil entices young people from the practice of virtue. The first is to convince them that the service of God consists in living a life of melancholy, devoid of all pleasure and enjoyment . . . I should like to teach you a kind of christian life which will make you happy and contented . . . the second snare is the hope of a long life, with the expectation of conversion in old age or when death threatens. Be careful, my dear children, because many have been deceived in this matter."

The key to the understanding of the saint's invitation is found in love. He lets slip certain expressions which governed his life's programme: "My young friends, you are very dear to me. It is enough for me to know that you are young to become interested in your welfare . . . It would be difficult to find one who has a greater love for your true happiness." Important for this book is an examination of certain expressions with which Don Bosco traces out a programme of christian living for his boys. He starts off by affirming: "It is my earnest wish that you all do some spiritual reading each day." This exercise, in the first instance on the level of individual formation, was to become later on catechesis at a community level. He says in fact: "I recommend you to attend the catechism lessons. It is no use saying I have made my First Communion. Your soul still needs nourishment just as much as your body. If you deprive your soul of this food you run the risk of very serious spiritual damage."

For Don Bosco the nourishment and food of the soul is the Word of God, "namely sermons, explanations of the Gospel and catechism." No mention however, of his *Sacred History* which saw the light in the same year as the *Companion of Youth*! The recommendation about spiritual reading referred only to those books he had read and which gave solid and useful teachings: the *Imitation of Christ*, *The Introduction to a Devout Life*, *The Preparation for Death*, *Jesus in the Heart of the Young*, etc. Among the practices of piety prescribed each day for the boys were,



besides the Apostles Creed, the Acts of Faith, Hope and Charity. Because of daily repetition it was felt that they would be indelibly imprinted in the minds of the young.

Explaining the method of assisting at Mass, he has his readers pray three times for the Church and the Pope, invoking peace, concord and blessings on all constituted authority, both spiritual and temporal.

## A wider range of catechetics

Don Bosco's catechetical activity extended over a wide range of activities. His field of work spread far and wide in search for an integral christian education.

Don Bosco knew quite well, and the realities of each day kept on reminding him of it with tragic insistence, that it is not enough to give a beautiful catechism class if the recipient is deprived of the conditions that are indispensable for the living out of an authentic human existence. There was need of the material charity of bread, clothing and support and the means to provide this had to be found. So, within the work of catechetics, we find quite a number of activities which we shall briefly consider, well aware that the list is far from complete.

### 1. Oratories

Don Bosco was neither the inventor or founder of the Oratory in Turin. But he was the most courageous, the most constant, the most intelligent of all those who ran them. The essential importance of the Oratory was strongly argued by Don Bosco's second successor, Don Albera. He felt that the Salesian Congregation "was born in the Oratory and for the Oratory and could neither continue or prosper without it." He even went so far as to claim that "the Festive Oratory of Don Bosco is the soul of our Pious Society."

It would be well to clear up once and for all what Don Bosco meant by the Oratory. "The word *Oratory* can be understood in several ways. If it is understood as a festive gathering, it means a place destined for pleasant recreation for boys after they have satisfied their religious duties . . . If we take the word in a wider sense it means the House at



Valdocco in Turin, known as the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales" (From Don Bosco's *Life of Francis Besucco*).

## 2. "Popular" Schools

Even here Don Bosco did not invent anything new but added a personal touch, a loving concern for the individual. He started them because "the dangers to which young people are exposed in matters of religion and morality demand greater diligence in protecting them."

## 3. Youth Associations

Don Bosco set these up as the needs of the moment demanded them. They were either of a religious or recreational nature or aimed at protecting the interests of young workers.

## 4. Hostels, Colleges, Boarding Schools

These arose out of special historical and local needs. A lot of money was needed to build and maintain them and this money Don Bosco did not have. Hence the continual need to find it. "This is perhaps the most burdensome and worrying part of his life" (Braido). Cardinal Cagliero supports this when he says, "Don Bosco suffered intensely whenever he had to call on someone for charity" (MB IV,7). In this regard there is an explicit confession made by Don Bosco two years before his death. Replying to someone who said that he found it very hard to ask for alms, he said: "Ah, if you only knew how much it cost me to beg for charity."

## 5. Work for religious and priestly vocations

Just one statistic: in 1883 Don Bosco stated that about 2000 diocesan priests had studied in his schools. "It can be said that the Oratory for nearly 20 years (1849-1869) became the diocesan seminary" (MO, pages 211-212).

## 6. Editorial activities and the apostolate of the press

We will deal with this aspect in the third chapter.

## 7. Building of churches

From the very humble Pinardi Shed transformed into a chapel in 1846 to the church of St. Francis of Sales (1851-



1852), later on to the Basilica of Mary, Help of Christians (1863-1868), then the church of St. John the Evangelist (1882), and finally the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome (1887). And alongside all these churches a work "to bring together wandering children, to teach catechism, thence to the preaching to adults as well about religion."

8. *Ministry of the confessional and spiritual direction*

that "took up untold hours of his time" (Braido).

9. *The foundation of two religious orders*

Sufficient on this point a simple confession of the saint: "Had I foreseen the heartaches, work, difficulties and hostilities that are inevitable in founding a religious congregation I might have lacked the courage to attempt it" (MB X,183).

10. *Positions of responsibility in the Church and for the Church*

Undisputed obedience to the Pope, disinterested collaboration in reconciling intricate disputes between State and Church, misunderstandings in the long and mortifying struggle with Archbishop Gastaldi . . .

11. *The missions*

which from 1875 onwards were to give a more catholic dimension to his work. "In our little way we also want to add our small pebble to the building of the great edifice of the Church" (MB XI,361).

**Don Bosco gets down to the work of catechesis**

From 1841 onwards Don Bosco had gathered together small groups of abandoned boys for Sunday instruction. The programme was intense and solid even if "sweetened" by the joy of games and recreations. From 1847 onwards the Lenten catechism classes were Don Bosco's main concern. He aimed at having small classes, with ten to twelve at the most in each. The problem arose of finding a supply of catechists. He gave to each of these a notebook where they marked down the attendances and gave each student a daily



mark in conduct and progress. He reserved to himself the adults, the ignorant and all those who, because of their rough manners, would only hold up the progress of a class and would, most likely, end up by discouraging the teacher. Many difficulties had to be overcome but Don Bosco found solutions for them all, with the minimum of fuss even if that meant putting up with certain disturbances. For example, many could not attend catechism in their parishes at the time it was given, so Don Bosco organized classes for them from midday to 1:30 p.m. For those who could not attend these he put on night classes. Many came to these classes spontaneously. Others were invited personally (cf. *MB* III,124-128). In this work, so eminently priestly and apostolic, he often experienced disappointments in that he was misunderstood, left single-handed and abandoned by his helpers.

However, Don Bosco had the tenacity and the constancy of the saints. In 1854, writing to a priest, he was able to say: "I have about 400 boys attending the daily Lenten catechism classes at midday. That means that morality among these poor boys is not altogether lost" (*MB* V,29). This whole 5th Volume of the *Biographical Memoirs* is particularly rich in the description of his catechetical activities and the fine results arising from these Lenten catechism classes.

In a chronicle which one of his Salesians kept daily, we find entered for the 21st April, 1862: "This Lent we have been busy teaching catechism so had no time either to keep this diary up-to-date or to meet together" (*MB* VII,81).

This was a community of catechists in action!

### Those being catechized

Especially at the beginning they were poor and abandoned boys who had come down from the mountains or in from the countryside in droves into the city of Turin. They found shelter wherever they could and so, technically, belonged to some parish or other in the city. Hence the complaints of the parish priests that Don Bosco and the Oratory "were setting up classes independently of the parishes" (*MB* II,279).

The crisis went on for some time and the development of



this apostolate was being threatened so Don Bosco humbly put the whole question before the Archbishop and asked him to set down some guidelines. Archbishop Fransoni asked for some time to consider the matter and on the 30th March 1847 replied in these terms: "The chapels of the Oratories will be considered the parishes of the boys who attend them." Don Bosco was proud to call the Oratory of Valdocco "the parish of abandoned boys" (*MB* III,134-135). And so the defenceless lads who came down from the valleys of Aosta, the chimney sweeps of Savoy, the stone-masons of Biella, the lads from Novara, Lombardy, Switzerland—all those who came to Turin to seek their fortune could count on the friendship and support of Don Bosco.

### The catechists

Whilst teaching religion in the city schools Don Bosco picked out students who he felt would be able to help him as catechists on the Sunday. As a good psychologist he made the task attractive by giving them tutorials in some of their subjects and by going over their exercises with them. (cf. *MB* II,75. 388).

Several priests, among them Don Borel, a priest Don Bosco always remembered with deep feelings of gratitude, helped side by side with members of the nobility, lawyers, engineers, public servants etc. for many years. Even here things did not always go smoothly. Various elements—inexperience, the winds of political struggle that troubled consciences and agitated spirits, the pressure of criticism—were responsible for so many of the catechists, formed so carefully by Don Bosco, leaving him in the lurch. It was a sad moment but Don Bosco faced up to it courageously. He called all his dissatisfied catechists together and thanked them. Then he calmly but frankly added: "I am not at all satisfied with you. If you want to quit, do so; if you don't want to teach here, teach elsewhere. I'll train some new catechists to replace you. I have done it before and I can do it again." All went off but many of them were to return. One of them confessed: "Something is missing—that something which made us go so willingly to Valdocco" (*MB* IV,262-263).



Don Bosco took special pains to form catechists from among the boys. He gave himself very generously to them and trusted them entirely. Many of them were to become Salesians. Don Lemoyne writes: "Although they were mere boys, each of them managed a class of twenty to twenty-five lively youngsters and went about their task seriously. Although several students were older than their catechists, the classes were always orderly" (*MB IV*, 264).

### The text

Last century every diocese in Italy had its own catechism. Don Bosco, in contact with youngsters from so many different places, was convinced of the need of a uniform text and had spoken of this need many times to various bishops.

In the meeting of the Subalpine bishops at Villanovetta (concerning which we will have to speak regarding the catechetical activities of Don Bosco in the spreading of good books) in July 1849, the following decision was reached. "The Conference appointed a committee of bishops to compile a uniform catechism, using the catechism of Bishop Casati of Mondovi and that of Cardinal Costa of Turin as a basis . . . Unfortunately this project was not carried out at the time" (*MB III*, 379-380).

It was not that any of the catechisms contained errors but the fact, for example, that two neighbouring dioceses had two different texts created difficulties especially for the simple and the ignorant and to young people in a continual state of migration.

Don Bosco spoke of this need to Pius IX in 1870. This was during the 1st Vatican Council. In the 49th General Congregation 535 bishops declared in favour of a uniform text for the Catholic world—only 56 voted against the proposal. All that was missing was the final vote—this was never held because political unrest put an end to the whole Council. He brought it up again in another papal audience, this time with Leo XIII (25th April 1882). The Pope listened to all the saint's arguments and requests ("Among so many Briefs on other important matters, a Brief also on this! But it's necessary . . .). He then went on to explain in detail the work



that the various Commissions were doing. Don Bosco was never so outspoken as in this Audience: "You will pardon me, Your Holiness, but by doing it this way all the members of the Commission—and their successors—will be dead before a conclusion is reached!" He then went on to explain in detail the work that the various Commissions were doing. He went on to put forward his own plan of attack. The Pope listened with obvious attention but there was still a long way to go (*MB* XV,533-537). For his part, as usual, Don Bosco did not stop at the level of discussion for he had already done something practical. In 1885 he had prepared a Short Catechism for children for the use of the diocese of Turin. It was preceded by Morning and Night Prayers. The prayers were followed by a compendium of Sacred History, in the form of a dialogue in fourteen bright chapters. There followed a presentation of Doctrine for those about to receive the sacraments of Confession, Communion and Confirmation. Six months later Canon Vigliotti, the archdiocesan revisor, approved of the text, making some minor alterations.

### **Don Bosco's catechetical method**

Of Don Bosco, catechist, Fr. Lemoyne has this to say: "His teaching was not a mere repetition of the questions and answers of the catechism" (*MB* II,118). In fact "he explained Christian doctrine in clear, simple terms adapted to the intelligence of all; it was a pleasure to listen to him" (*MB* III,81).

For twenty years, from 1846 to 1866, Don Bosco called his catechists together from time to time to train them as teachers. He passed on to them the fruits of his own long experience and sought to inspire them with his own love for souls. They met in the chapel of St. Francis of Sales. Among other things he insisted that the catechist should always stand up in class both to be able to see all the boys and to give a disciplined lesson. He asked them to demand only memory work but asked to give some reflections yet "without losing themselves in explanations that no one would understand" (*MB* VI,108-9).

The lessons should not go for more than thirty minutes. "Five minutes before the end, the altar bell would ring.



All the boys would shout out together: Story! Story! and the catechists without further ado, to the boys' great delight, would narrate some episode from the lives of the saints, church history or miracles of the Blessed Virgin. The boys' shouting might have sounded irreverent in church but Don Bosco knew that, after sitting quietly for so long, they needed some outlet" (MB III,81-82).

Having fought all his life for the cause of the Kingdom of God, Don Bosco could not remain silent when any of his sons did not share his own enthusiasm for evangelization.

In the final conference given to the Salesians at the 1869 Retreat he 'blasted' the cold lack of interest in some: "How sad it is to see crowds so badly in need of intellectual and moral formation and no one to take care of them. Occasionally, even in a Festive Oratory, one may find priests or clerics whose only concern seems to be their own enjoyment rather than giving religious instruction to those entrusted to them by God's mercy."

And after a bitter lament, a paternal request: "Teach catechism readily, tell youngsters about the heroic deeds of charity performed by the saints and use examples to illustrate God's mercy and justice . . . How many boys are just waiting for religious instruction, eager to learn of God's law. Prepare them to receive the sacraments regularly" (MB IX,333-334).

Of fundamental importance are three documents; two from the pen of Don Bosco and the third from the Minister of State, perhaps influenced by the saint. These were published respectively in 1847, 1853 and 1870. The first, of Don Bosco, is the *Regulation for the Oratories* (MB III,441-457); the second, an instruction from the Minister Cibrario dealing with the teaching of catechism in elementary schools (MB IV, 421-423); the third document, again by Don Bosco, is in reference to *Regulations for Sunday Catechism* (MB XIV, 838-389).

Let us examine the salient points of the three documents: (1) In the 1847 document, improved upon up to the final edition of 1887, of importance for our study is Chapter 8 of the first part entitled: *The Catechists*. There are 16 articles. Don Bosco begins with words of praise for what they are doing (Art.1); then some practical norms of method (Art. 2-10.13) and of psychology (Art.16); the vices that must



be combatted (Art.11) viz. blasphemy, profanation of the sabbath, impurity, stealing, lack of sorrow for sin, lack of firm resolution and sincerity in confession; the virtues that should be stressed (Art.12) viz. charity towards companions, obedience to superiors, love of work, shunning of idleness and bad companions, frequent confession and Communion.

(2) The 1853 document is not Don Bosco's. The Minister Cibrario on the 21st August of that year published a Directive for implementing the Religion programmes in elementary schools. It insisted upon adequate training of catechists so that the teaching be good and the teacher might not be caught unprepared for the students' impromptu questions. It prescribed an adequate explanation suited to the mentality of the child so that he might be able to fully understand the "previous meaning" of the words. The History of Salvation should preface the study of the catechism.

It would not be worthwhile making even a brief study of this document if it were not for the fact that there are many striking similarities between it and Don Bosco's ideas. For example:

- There is a marked similarity, not only of ideas but even of words, between this document and talks on catechetics given by Don Bosco;

- Fr. Lemoyne remarks that "Cibrario often came to the Oratory in this year (We are in 1853!) and had long and serious talks with Don Bosco who, obviously, was not wasting time talking about politics. These visits were also noticed by the boys" (MB IV,423).

(3) *The Regulations for the Sunday Catechism* were promulgated by Don Bosco before 1870. They are practical directives, rich in good psychology and methodology, the fruit of a long and dedicated experience. Let's pick out some of them:

"Do not get lost in academic details or examples. It is a matter of instructing the young in the science of salvation. The time for catechism is short; use all the time in explaining the answers word by word." "Do not be trapped into a vain looking for praise because you have said beautiful things.



The Lord will demand an account of whether we have instructed the boys and not whether we have amused them."

"Do not put the catechism aside to show off your theological knowledge. Explain it faithfully word by word. Young people do not understand certain reasonings and either fall into error or are scandalized."

If Don Bosco insisted so much on the learning that catechists should possess, it was not that the teacher should suffocate his students or bore them with a host of cold reasonings; but only that the lessons be better understood and the message of salvation be more acceptable. For Don Bosco the catechism "is not only a symbol of faith but a rule to live by." He seemed to fear a purely intellectual Christianity without a close connection with the reality of daily living. What he feared was a divorce between faith and life.

There is to be noted, then, a constant progression in the catechetical education imparted by Don Bosco. He started off with the essential truths of the faith, then went on to the little diocesan catechism. Up to this the programme was the same for all. Then, for those who were able and willing to absorb it, the large catechism. There is another step; a training to refute with valid arguments the main errors of the day (*MB* III,146). The instructions, the exhortations, the vigilance of Don Bosco were to bear very consoling fruits. In a meeting of the Rectors of the Salesian Houses in 1876—all of them had been accepted by Don Bosco as boys!—one of them spoke about three rules that experience had found to be most valid:

1. Divide the catechism into sections and teach the little ones only what is strictly necessary. For the more senior, keep adding new notions as they advanced in years and intelligence so that a young person, at a given leaving age, would know all the catechism.

2. To obtain silence in the chapel, the catechist should not move about too much, should speak quietly and, instead of dismissing the one causing a disturbance from the church or make him kneel down, should leave him where he is and then send him to the Superior who will know what action to take.



3. It has been found beneficial to gather the youngsters near the church door before asking them to go in. But the catechists should be at their posts to receive them. Entering the church, a hymn should be struck up to cover the inevitable noise" (MB XII,72-723).

This is the advice Don Bosco gave his catechists from time to time, advice that you can read every time he touched on the argument. Because he had formed a large group of obedient and trustworthy disciples he had ensured a continuity in his catechetical apostolate.

### "Active research" in Don Bosco's catechesis

Don Bosco, in his very personal approach to catechetics, made abundant use of a means particularly apt to arouse the youngsters' interest in the study of religion. This was the method of "active research."

We come across examples of this in the *Biographical Memoirs*: "Oh, do I always have to do everything myself? Come on, don't you know that? At least this once, give me an answer! If you really don't know, look it up because it is not too hard. I'll have a prize for the best answer next Sunday" (MB III,86).

And from his first biographer this affirmation: "In the same way and with the same results he would ask them questions on various topics. Keeping their minds busy he considered a very effective means to shield them from evil" (MB III,86-87).

Again Don Bosco would get the boys' interest by demanding questions, study and research. "Next Sunday I want you to tell me why the Blessed Sacrament is called the Eucharist and what the original meaning of the word Paradise is. At other times he would propose they explain the meaning of the word 'death' or 'purgatory,' or the various meanings of the word 'hell' (MB III,87). Another piece of advice from Don Bosco, practiced by himself, was to keep a notebook entitled *A Notebook of Experience*, in which were written down faults, mistakes, disorders as they happen and to read over these notes from time to time (MB VII,316).



Don Bosco advised the boys to follow a similar method and assured them: "By this means you will soon have a rich store of honey, that is to say, of worthwhile knowledge, good works, and holy joy stemming from the peace within your heart" (*MB* VII,367).

Firmly convinced of the validity of his principles of method, he insisted on them once more in 1880, speaking to his priest past pupils, meeting together for his feastday: "To succeed with boys, make sure you treat them well. Make yourselves loved and not feared, let them see you only desire the good of their souls. Correct with patience and charity their defects . . . It might seem, as far as some are concerned, that you are throwing your words to the winds and the effort is not worthwhile. For the moment this may seem to be true but rest assured, even in the case of the most troublesome, that is not so. They will have drunk in your maxims, given in season and out of season. Your kindness in dealing with them will remain impressed on their hearts and minds. The time will come when the seed will germinate and will send forth flowers and produce abundant fruit" (*MB* XIV,513). Without realizing it, he was painting a picture of his own work in action!

### Ways and means of attracting young people

Don Bosco made use of many means to attract and win over boys. Above all his own charism, his style, his outstanding personality. Eloquent in this regard are the recollections of some of his boys: "His charm so fascinated us that we could hardly wait for the moment to be with him" (*MB* I,232). "He spoke too engrossingly that an hour seemed like a minute" (*MB* I,232). To use Fr. Braido's happy expression, he possessed "the pedagogy of reward." Let us add that he had this from his earliest years. Already in 1842 (with thirty boys or so!) "In the evenings, at a set hour, there was a hymn, followed by catechism, then a story, then the distribution of some "goodies," sometimes to everyone, sometimes to those whose numbers were pulled out of a hat" (*MO*, page 129).

Six years later—1848. There was no talk except of the war



with the Austrians, of independence—souls were excited with the first generous beatings of patriotism as the boys became involved in a military atmosphere. An observant educator was fully aware of this. Don Bosco did not hesitate to allow the Oratory boys to play war games and transform the courtyard into a battleground. More than this, intelligently and quietly, he took the initiative himself. "He found a way to provide his boys with a good supply of mock rifles. As a condition of playing with them, he laid down the rule that the boys were not to come to blows as the Piedmontese and the Austrians were doing, and that at the sound of the bell all were to put aside their arms and file into the church" (*MB* III,226).

Other games were introduced; good plays and farces were put on the stage. He organized the band and the choir. He put on displays and academies and invited leading personalities, clerical and lay, to preside over them. Don Bosco himself spoke of "a mixture of devotion, games and outings" (*MO*, pages 157-8).

For 17 years, from 1847 to 1864, Don Bosco organized the famous autumn walks, which past pupils remembered as the most wonderful and the most memorable events of their life. Don Bosco mounted a real tour that lacked nothing; concerts, plays, church functions, singing, wonderful meals. We might rightly say that even here he had in mind a gradual catechesis even if presented in so simple a style.

Don Bosco knew how to blend the mobility of young people, their taste for adventure and their thirst for discovery with more important elements. The boys stopped over at Mondonio to visit the little cemetery where Dominic Savio was buried. He gave them a guided tour of the Abbey of Vezzolano where he spoke to them in simple terms of art and the monastic spirit. His aim was more than a grand tour. He was convinced that "serving God and having good, wholesome fun went hand in hand" (*MB* II,302). The catechetical intent of Don Bosco in these walks becomes clear in the reminiscences of a past pupil: "He went to great lengths to keep us happy and contented and he took the greatest care to keep us from ever offending God" (*MB* V,482). It was on one of these walks that Michael Magone suffered his crisis. One evening, contemplating the starry heavens, he could not help remarking that only man dares to disobey his Creator.







## Chapter Two

### The Proclamation of the Word of God

#### Catechesis in Action

On the day of his First Mass, Don Bosco asked the Lord for a special grace: the efficacy of the Word. Thirty years afterwards he was able to say, "It seems that the Lord heard my humble prayer" (*MO*, page 112).

At the Ecclesiastical Institute he had, as his professor of moral theology and sacred eloquence, Fr. Cafasso, from whom he learnt the style, the methodology and from whom he borrowed his themes for preaching. He was urged to develop a simple and practical catechesis "that makes virtue loved and vice abhorred." "Convinced that unbelief rests more in the heart than in the mind and, once the heart is made whole, prejudices disappear and faith returns" he was urged to make of his preaching that which "speaks to the heart" (Quotations are from the *Life of Fr. Cafasso* by Fr. Colombero). Fr. Cafasso exacted from his students, therefore, a form of preaching adapted to the intelligence of the listeners. He wanted them to use simple expressions, to have respect for the faithful, to be short and not to annoy, to be interesting by using examples from everyday life and season all sermons with scriptural references. Notwithstanding some initial concession to the pompous eloquence of the time it can be said that Don Bosco was a docile and malleable pupil. After his graduation he followed the advice of his master. The christian is he who "is guided by the Divine Word" (*Month of May*, 9th day). From this follows the tremendous



responsibility that the preacher has to draw "his eloquence not only from worldly wisdom but according to the spirit of God" (MB IX,16). Don Bosco, as his ideas and methods matured, came to understand that the characteristic of his catechetics must be simplicity.

Fr. Stella rightly notes that his preaching "was often modest in form and content yet productive of a wonderful rapport with young and old which led to them living out their religion more intensely." This judgement is the same as that of Fr. Ceria (*Don Bosco con Dio*, page 189) both as regards its modest form and its ability to convert and transform its listeners.

With all this it must not be thought that the saint preached a very stereotyped sort of sermon. If it is true that his sermons were always on the same themes, it is equally true that his anxiety to do good was ever being renewed (cf. MB III,48 for a list of topics).

Basing ourselves on numerous sources (e.g. MB III,60; XII,170; V,889; XIII,292) we are able to draw up his rules for preaching

- a) begin each sermon with a motivating theme: "The introduction should be taken from some circumstance of place, time or occasion" (Fr. Barberis)
- b) speak simply and slowly so that the people can understand. At times it is good to initiate a dialogue with the listeners, putting before them questions that would arouse some discussion. (MB II,229; III,124; V,554-556)
- c) be brief and down-to-earth; "twenty minutes and no more" (MB XIII,118)
- d) select topics that apply to everyone. Speaking to Fr. Guanella, he stressed his thoughts on this. "If you want to win over children and preach fruitfully to them, tell them stories, parables and similitudes but, above all, fill in your story with the smallest details. This will excite their interest in the characters. Children will share their joys or sorrows according to what impresses them most and will anxiously follow the story to its end" (MB II,265-266).
- e) Bear in mind the age, the social condition and the degree of education of the congregation. (cf. interesting conversation



of Don Bosco with his helpers in the January of 1868 in MB IX,15-16).

f) as a basic text for all preaching, do not neglect the catechism (MB IX,15). Fr. Stella says: "Don Bosco was by preference the catechist who explains the principles of the catechism in popular form either when speaking to the boys, to country people or to academics."

g) To exact from the congregation not merely a passive listening to the Word but one that is translated into a concrete commitment to a full Christian life. "Never leave a sermon without carrying away with you some maxim to practice as you go about your work" (MB IV,532).

In the five articles in the *Regulations for Festive Oratories* concerning Sermons and Instructions, Don Bosco condensed his thoughts on catechetics into norms of method which experience had taught him.

The first article deals with the nature of the topics to be treated and the criteria which should guide the preacher in his choice. In the second he insists on the importance of examples and stories and the essential scriptural background. The third is used by Don Bosco to recommend that preaching be "as simple and down-to-earth as possible." The fourth insists upon the obligation of brevity, taking a cue from St. Francis of Sales who says that it is preferable that "the preacher leaves a desire to hear more than to go away bored stiff." And young people, in particular, need to listen so every care must be taken not to 'turn them off.' He concludes with the fifth article which makes an urgent plea "to be clear and simple as possible" (MB III,467-468).

For Don Bosco the only worthwhile preaching is that which "produces conversions" (MB II,288). This is the occasion when he stops a young priest from preaching because he felt he was only preaching himself. For him it was inconceivable that anyone should take his duty of preaching lightly and he was convinced that a serious reform of life is the only indication of the efficacy of the preacher.



## Catechesis of the Last Things

Emphasis on the Last Things was not something peculiar to St. John Bosco. Fr. Braidò makes the observation that it is pure St. Alphonsus. In his *Companion of Youth*, which he put into the hands of his boys as a practical guide for the Christian life, there is, at the very beginning, a series of meditations on the intimate truths and eternal maxims concerning man's destiny. There are *Seven Considerations* for each day of the week: a brief eschatological 'summa,' written according to the realistic style of the day but aimed at helping "the maturing of strong resolutions about the salvation of one's soul."

His teaching, at the same time practical and directive, was directly based on St. Alphonsus, whose book, *Preparation for Death*, Don Bosco advised his boys to read. His letters, his short talks after Night Prayers, his writings all abound in these thoughts.

He was very much aware of the importance of those last moments in which man's eternal destiny depends. The choice made then, it was stressed, is not a logical consequence of a preceding deliberate choice. This is a thought that accompanied Don Bosco all throughout his life and he insisted on it more and more as he came to the last years of his own life. Two of these *Last Things*—death and heaven—occur most frequently in Don Bosco's written or oral catechesis.

### Death

The thought of death in catechetics was a fundamental one for Don Bosco. There are facts and experiences which, although they belong to the early years of one's life, make a deep and lasting impression on the soul of man. Don Bosco's first vivid memory was the death of his father. The description he gave of it after fifty years from the event gives us some idea of how it affected him in the most intimate part of his being (cf. *MO*, page 19).

The death of Fr. Calosso, his first great benefactor, of his two companions at school, and especially of his closest friend



at the seminary, Luigi Comollo, cut deep, indelible furrows in the very sensitive heart of Don Bosco. And so, because of family bereavements, of the passing of people very dear to him, because of a certain type of formation in which the passing nature of this life was stressed, death became a recurring thought in his life. It was a familiar topic at the Oratory, both because Don Bosco often spoke of it and because of the relatively high number of deaths at Valdocco. Don Bosco often spoke of it to the boys, not in mournful tones, not to instil a morbid fear among the boys but as an incentive for them to lead good lives.

It has been rightly stated that "Don Bosco diffused peace even when he spoke of death" (Desramaut: *Don Bosco and the Spiritual Life*, page 56). In his catechesis on death Don Bosco's style did not aim at terrifying young people with tormenting pictures. As a matter of fact, he did not speak of death in terms of hell and punishment, even if he made use of this thought "as a necessary means to check those who needed it." According to him, "the unwillingness to speak of the *Last Things*" is a mistake both in the field of pedagogy and of catechetics. An essential term of reference would be missing from the whole purpose of life. Rather than insisting upon the inevitability of death—he did not omit this, of course—he insisted upon the need of being prepared at all times. He knew quite well that "he who is not prepared to die well today runs the risk of dying badly and being in that state for all eternity." In line with these ideas, Don Bosco provided his boys with a monthly day of retreat. He called it by a challenging title which has an Ignatian ring about it: *The Exercise for a Happy Death*. The name announces the programme: a headlong plunge into the solemn mystery of eternity. He considered this monthly exercise as "the key to morality." On this day all were encouraged to go to confession and Communion as if on the point of death. There was to be a serious examination of conscience to see "what needs to be done in the future, what needs correcting, what needs removing."

In his catechesis Don Bosco spoke in a matter-of-fact way about impending deaths of boys in the Oratory. This did not lead to long faces and morbid thoughts, to a distaste for life. He had the gift of transforming for those boys who died



in his arms "death into a feastday." And so, for Don Bosco, death became an opening for his catechesis on heaven.

## Heaven

For Don Bosco, the thought of death was not always illumined by the thought of the resurrection. At times it was seen as a disaster, a consequence of the first sin and, as such, as a form of expiation. See, for example, the following invocation from the *Litany for a Happy Death*: "When I shall have shed my last tear, the sign of my dissolution do Thou receive it as a sacrifice of expiation, so that I may expire a victim of penance; and then, in that dreadful moment, merciful Jesus, have mercy on me." At other times it is seen in a more joyous light, a product of hope that becomes in the heart of a christian a certainty. After this earthly pilgrimage in this valley of tears will come that endless joy of paradise. Eternal happiness is the great thought that explains the activity of Don Bosco, that animated all his good works, that made up for all his sacrifices. Paradise was the word he repeated at every occasion to encourage apostolic activity and to find the strength to courageously put up with all sorts of set-backs. Don Bosco spoke so wonderfully of heaven, as one witness states: "like a son speaking about his father's home" (Ceria). It is a joyous refrain, a hope that nourishes faith in "a God so great and good at the same time." Amongst his boys those more spiritually mature such as Savio, Besucco and Magone spoke with such naturalness of heaven on their deathbeds. They seemed to be talking about their own home, they accepted commissions from their companions and superiors—they died with smiles on their faces!

## Catechesis of sin

Right from his very first dream, John Bosco was given a mission to which he was faithful throughout his life: "Get to work straightaway to instruct them about the ugliness of sin and the beauty of virtue" (*MO*, page 23). In his definition of



sin Don Bosco followed the mentality of his time: "it is any deed, desire or word contrary to the Law of God." But the thought of God gave life to a cold definition. Sin became something monstrously personal, a rebellion against the Creator. "When I commit a sin I turn my back on God my Creator, on the God of Goodness who has showered on me so many favours and I reject His Grace and His friendship. He who sins says to the Lord: Get out of my way, God, I don't want to obey you, I don't want to serve you, I don't want to recognize you any longer as my God." If sin is the "one evil that every christian must fear, it is because it places him in a state of rebellion, of refusal, of irrational opposition to God." All the more monstrous becomes the refusal when one considers that man "abandons God, the Supreme Good, to give himself to creatures and to satisfy his miserable body."

His catechesis is terse and logical. Man "created to know God . . . created to love God" will "always have an empty feeling in his heart" by not loving Him Who alone "can repay in this life and the next." Now by sin man refuses to form a friendship with God. "He blows out the lights of reason; he wallows in his sordid actions; he walks like a beast after the vile things of this world; he tries everything and spares no effort to indulge his sensuality; he adds debauchery on debauchery, ill-deeds on ill-deeds, sin upon sin . . . until he reaches a stage of depravity which desires nothing but the obscenity of sin, seeks nothing but the dreadful consequences of sin." All Don Bosco's work with his boys was to form in them convinced and mature consciences so that they could really make free and responsible decisions. His instinctive horror for sin, and especially of the sin of impurity, led him to stress the key of perfect sorrow, the thought of the presence of God, the obligation of sacrificing everything rather than to compromise with sin. At other times he stressed the fear of sin and the strong influence of a personal contact with the Eucharistic Lord.

These are some of the fronts, barely touched on, on which Don Bosco waged his war against sin, without let up or respite. A battle so fierce and continuous to give at times the impression of a frontal attack against the very incarnation of evil. A battle so fierce that allowed for no armistice: "I will rest when the devil stops tempting my boys."



## The "Good Night"

Several times, in these pages, mention has been made of a custom that was peculiar to Don Bosco: the so-called *Good Night* that Fr. Ceria defines as "a fatherly word given by the Superior to his boys in the peace of the evening before going to bed."

The term arises simply because the talk ends with this wish, to which all answer: "Thanks" (or return the greeting). Without dwelling on the origins of this custom, we will take the definition as given by Don Bosco himself in the treatise on the *Preventive System*: "Every evening after Night Prayers and before the boys go to rest, the Rector, or someone in his stead, should address a few kind words to them, giving advice or counsel concerning what is to be done or what is to be avoided. He should try to draw some moral reflection from facts which have happened during the day in the Institute or outside; but he should never occupy more than two or three minutes."

We have here all the elements necessary for an understanding of the catechetical importance of this simple means: love—incisiveness—brevity. It is not necessary to stress the importance Don Bosco placed on this practice. For him the Good-Night was a "powerful means of persuasion" (MB XI,302) and still more: "the key to morality, to the smooth running and success of an educational enterprise (MB XIII,922). Why so much blind faith in this feature? Don Bosco replies by saying that the value of these few words is not based on some magic formula but in its kind presentation, in the way it sets the boys thinking: "Just a few words around one striking thought to impress the boys and send them to bed fully taken up with the truth presented to them" (MB VI,45).

"These short talks nipped disorders in the bud before they had time to bloom" (MB VI,45).

His first biographer attests to the effects the Good-Night had: "The Oratory steadily kept the excellence of its moral and spiritual fabric. The secret? Don Bosco's daily short talk after Night Prayers. He looked upon this task as a personal one and would delegate it only when unavoid-



able" (MB VI,45). Those who lived through these days can attest to the marvellous effects of his short talk (cf. *Vita intima di Don Bosco*: Don Ballesio). The intelligent and devoted love of some of the helpers and even of some of his boys gathered more than three hundred of these talks—the Good-Night, which is not a sermon, nor a moralizing feverino and much less a tiring repetition of trite remarks. In the mind of Don Bosco the Good-Night has its own particular style, its own genial imprint. Better than anything else would be a couple of examples.

a) 5th July 1876. Don Bosco made use of the very hot and muggy days at this time to inculcate a manly attitude to certain difficulties. "We must ask the man who lights the stoves in the morning to use less wood, otherwise we will all get burnt up. If any of you need a blanket, let me know and I will get it for him! . . . My dear boys, we need to become accustomed to accepting all from the hands of God—cold, thirst and all the other difficulties in life. And now let us put up with the heat to gain merits to help us get into heaven" (MB XII,357-358).

b) 11th February 1877. One of the lads at Valdocco had died suddenly. Here is how Don Bosco spoke to the boys that evening: "Good for him if he was well prepared as we hope he was. This fact should be a lesson for us because, when we least expect it, death will pounce on us. If we were to face the same fate would we be ready? . . . On the day after tomorrow we will have the *Exercise for a Happy Death* and then the Prior of St. Aloysius will give each one of you a nice fat slice of salami to renew your energies. The preparation for this exercise will commence tomorrow evening . . . In this Carnival season this should be your true joy: to have a clear conscience. Take note of the state of your soul, so that when the Lord comes to take us to Himself, He will find us well prepared" (MB XIII,87-88).

c) 7th July 1875. Making reference to the harvest operations they would see the next day as they walked through the fields, he used the occasion to stress the need to merit heaven by good deeds: "When you go out tomorrow for your weekly walk you will see the farmers harvesting wheat . . .



This reminds me of something we have read many times in Holy Scripture: A man reaps what he sows. Now tell me, if the farmers, who are now so pleased and delighted with their crops, had not taken the trouble to sow, weed and water their fields carefully at the proper time, would they now be able to rejoice at the harvest? They could not, of course, because one must sow if he wants to reap. That's how it will be with you. If you sow now, you will have the satisfaction of reaping a good harvest when the time comes. But whoever shirks this work now will starve at harvest time" (MB XI,233).

d) 27th October 1876. It was near the beginning of the novena for All Saints and Don Bosco, recalling the many saintly souls who had lived at the Oratory, stirred up the consciences of his boys by presenting them with their destiny, heaven, and pointing out to them that the certain way of getting there was by being holy.

"The novena for All Saints is well on its way but I have not yet noticed that we have become better people . . . I remember certain lads, like Dominic Savio, Magone, Besucco and others, who really put their heart into making these novenas with extraordinary fervour. You could not have asked for more . . . at that time there was a universal feeling of fervour. There were only sixty or seventy boys at the time and every day there were sixty or seventy Communions. Why is this so? Is it because poor Don Bosco does not talk any more with his boys or is it because he does not understand them as he once did? It could be a bit of both. But what is more important is that you become good. There's still time. Have you ever seen bundles of sticks placed on top of one another on a fire. As soon as one catches alight it sets fire to the others. You can do the same, you know. During this novena let each one urge the other on to good. A match may set alight a piece of hay in a stack and, in no time, the whole stack will be ablaze. In the same way it only needs one of you to make up his mind to become a saint and set fire to the others with his good example and good advice. And if everyone of you made up his mind to do that? Oh, what a terrific thing that would be!" (MB XII,557).



## Catechesis of the playground

If it is true that the playground is the proving ground for a Salesian, it is because of many reasons, principally because it was in the playground that Don Bosco was more the catechist than in any other place. In the middle of lively recreations, in which he took an active part (cf. *MB* IV,263), Don Bosco showed himself to be a real friend to the boys, where he really got to know those for whom he worked. The "catechesis of the playground" cannot always be learnt from books but it is essential for any educator who wants to know his boys and be known by them, to understand its importance. Don Bosco, himself, practiced this catechesis in three main ways, all seemingly easy and non-taxing but, in reality, charged with responsibility and problems.

### *Recreations.*

This testimony sums up the whole matter: "Those who kept near Don Bosco received some bit of useful advice" (*MB* VI,226). Here is a simple example (N.B. all Ch.30 of *MB* VI is worth reading). To a boy who had not frequented the sacraments for months, he asked: "Are you coming to have a meal with me tomorrow?" "Yes, I'd love to." "Right, but tomorrow I eat at 7.30 (he was referring to Mass)."

Another boy was playing like mad in recreation. Red and puffing, he passed by Don Bosco who asked him: "How are you?" "Terrific" was all the boy had time to say before he was almost out of earshot. Don Bosco's voice just carried to him: "Spiritually as well?" The remark hit him like a bullet. The boy, still breathing hard, came back, his eyes cast down. Don Bosco insisted: "If you were to die tonight, would you be quite happy?" "Not very." "When are you going to confession?" "Tomorrow morning." Don Rua asserts: "A short chat with Don Bosco was worth more than a Retreat."



## A "glance"

Let us say immediately, to avoid misunderstanding, that there was nothing magical about a glance from Don Bosco. Yet we must bear in mind what a Salesian, who lived with Don Bosco ever since he was a young boy, has to say about it: "Many times Don Bosco looked at a boy in such a way as to communicate his thoughts without saying a word" (*MB VI,234*).

Another Salesian who had been with Don Bosco almost all of his life gives a very eloquent example of a boy in crisis as a result of a look from Don Bosco. It happened during the famous autumn walks. All were asleep one night in a dormitory and one lad was tossing and turning. His neighbour woke up and asked him what the matter was. This was his answer: "What's the matter? Yesterday evening Don Bosco looked at me! . . . Oh, I know Don Bosco's looks!" (Fr. Francesca: *The Autumn Walks*) Finally, an old saintly past pupil related in 1889 that "Don Bosco's most striking trait was his glance—kindly, yet penetrating the heart's inmost recesses; a glance that charmed, frightened or even crushed, as the case might be. In all my life I never saw anything like it" (*MB VI,2*).

## A word in the ear (cf. *MB VI,224-231*)

The expression was coined by Don Bosco's boys themselves. His biographer does not hesitate to define it as an echo of God's Word. The manner of giving it was both practical and discreet.

"Don Bosco, placing his hand over his head and stooping to the boy's ear, would screen his mouth with the other hand and whisper a word or two. The boys' reactions were worth seeing. One would smile, another become serious, a third blush to the roots of his hair. One boy would cry, another nod in agreement, a third shake his head. One lad would walk off to a quiet corner and walk up and down on his own. Another would shout out 'thanks' and dash off to play; a third would immediately go off to pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament" (*MB VI,230*).



What did he say? What advice did he give? The *Biographical Memoirs* provide us with some beautiful examples:

"Would you do a little something for Our Lady as study better, for example?"

"Jesus is waiting for you in the church."

"Why not keep your hands to yourself?"

"Have you made a good confession?"

"Why don't you go to confession more often?"

"Ah, those friends of yours!"

"If only you could see your soul's condition."

"Remember, God sees you."

"Try to be good and we will enjoy heaven together."

"Help me to save your soul."

"Be obedient and you will become a saint."

"Do you think you will sleep peacefully tonight?"

(MB VI,231)

Don Bosco had the sensitivity and the concern to communicate the Word of God on every occasion that presented itself. In this case, the 'word in the ear' was for him a penetrating occasional catechesis. At this point we can understand the significance of two facts which, even if they are quite different, have a common root. His first biographer affirms that Don Bosco's greatest desire "was to destroy sin and make God known, served, adored and loved more and more by everybody and in every place" (MB III,45).

The second is a little piece of historical evidence to which one should give only the value it merits. The doctors found, at the time of the solemn recognition of Don Bosco's remains for his beatification and canonization, that his tongue was in a perfect state of preservation.







### *Chapter Three*

#### **Don Bosco's Catechesis as a Writer**

In the vast range of Don Bosco's catechesis that of a writer was neither peripheral nor secondary. Fr. Lemoyne gives a good overall judgement when he writes: "His faith drove him to spend entire nights in writing books on religion, defending doctrines under attack at the time, by protestants, refuting their errors by arguments easily understood even by the most uneducated people." (MB IV,365)

Fr. Stella affirms: "Don Bosco was personally convinced that to preach the Good News by means of the press was a service he was obliged to render as an educator of youth and the common people."

It is true that Don Bosco did not spare the protestants but this apologetics would have been useless if he had not adapted himself to the mentality of simple people and if he had not initiated an easily understood dialogue with his readers. The educative character of Don Bosco's writings gives ample evidence of competency and a solid cultural, biblical, patristic and ascetical background. Yet, at the same time, they show a great concern that they be understood by all.

Don Bosco, when he wrote, was an outstanding catechist. Above all, he had a fine understanding of the problem. He confronted it resolutely. "Without flinging words to the wind, he studied the matter, unearthed its good, practical aspects and, while other people argued, went into action" (MB XI,404)



Fr. Valentini, in his booklet "Don Bosco and the Apostolate of the Press" (1957), has this to say: "If one cannot say that the apostolate of the press was the main aim of his work and life, it can be said that it was amongst his principal preoccupations and goals."

In a *Circular* written in 1885 on the distribution of good books, Don Bosco was able to say in all simplicity: "This was one of the main missions given to me by Divine Providence and you all well know how I had to stick at it despite the thousand and one difficulties that I encountered. There was the violent hatred of the enemies of good, the persecution of my own person which demonstrated quite plainly how error saw in these books a formidable adversary and, for the contrary reason, how this mission was blessed by God." In conclusion he notes that "in these thirty years or so we distributed about 20 million booklets among the people."

The force that drove Don Bosco to write was neither the desire to make a name for himself as a writer nor to publish monumental works of biblical exegesis or history. With his vast culture he could have done both without any trouble. But for him, priest and catechist, the real aim was a spiritual one. The motive a purely apostolic one. Don Bosco's catechesis here, as elsewhere, was to defend orthodoxy and to make known the principles of the catholic faith. Don Bosco was convinced that "the first impressions that virgin minds and tender hearts of young people receive last all their lives and today's books are one of the main influences" (*Circular Letters*). He did not, however, hesitate to say that "the definite choice that they make for good or bad" depends "very much" on what they read, because "a bad book is a cancer that destroys many young people." This is the disastrous result of putting bad books in their hands. From a lamentation of the fact Don Bosco goes straight on to the attack. He does not stagnate in useless complaints but a quiet examination convinces him that he has to react in a concrete manner.

Given the times, it was a most necessary apostolate; a fire-eating and intolerant anticlericalism pulled no punches. The impact of this attack was not slow in manifesting itself. A crusading catholic paper reported: "To say that our unfortunate country has already become, because of our evil



doings, a disgraceful figure in the eyes of the world . . . is to make a harsh judgement but a true one. Was it not in Turin that a sermon was interrupted by loud whistles? Is it not here, against the laws of the country, that an archbishop had to leave his See despite the fact that he is innocent of any criminal offence? Is it not here that in our very midst there has been going on a most insolent parody of the Stations of the Cross and of the *Stabat Mater*, of catholic prayers, thus holding up to derision our most sacred mysteries? Are not all the works of Casti being reprinted with all their obscene and immoral passages? Is it not here in Turin that the bishops are being accused of allowing the faithful to be devoured by the wolves instead of protecting them? Point out any country which has gone downhill as fast as ours as a result of the work of a wicked faction about which it is hard to say whether their impudence or ignorance is more to be blamed?" (*Armonia*, page 19).

We are in 1850. A year before (from the 25th or the 30th July) the subalpine bishops had met at Villanovetta, in the diocese of Saluzzo, "to prepare themselves for the fierce struggles which they sensed were in the offing" (*MB* III,379). The aim of this meeting was "to preserve intact and inviolate the deposit of faith and religious discipline." Convinced that the license of the press was "the worst evil of our days," the bishops made a firm decision "to set up an association for the printing and distribution of the best ecclesiastical writings."

It was at this time that Don Bosco began to think about publishing the *Catholic Readings* and began to discuss the idea with the dynamic Bishop of Ivrea, Bishop Moreno. Quite a deal of correspondence was entered into: Don Bosco revealed his talents as a organizer and editor. The bishop, on the 4th August 1852, wrote to him in these terms: "This project is very dear to my heart and I urge you to give it your greatest care" (*MB* IV,367). A few months later, Bishop Moreno was able to assure him that everything was ready "to begin your well-known periodical" (*MB* IV,368).

The scope was twofold. There was the defensive aspect, that is "to stem the rising tide of heretical publications" (*MB* IV,344) but Don Bosco was not the person to wait for the adversary to attack. He believed the best form of defence



was to attack. "Our purpose is to instruct and strengthen the faithful in catholic principles, and to enlighten and attract the wayward to the observance of their religious duties with that kindness and loving charity so characteristic of our Divine Master. We ardently desire to do some good, or, at least, to prevent some evil" (MB V,620).

Bishop Moreno and Don Bosco chose the most practical means: the publication of popular pamphlets "with moral instructions, pleasant articles, edifying stories but all exclusively to do with the catholic religion." Uncertain until 1849, the saint finally took the plunge in 1850. He compiled a prospectus and submitted it to his superior, Archbishop Fransoni, now in exile in Lyons.

He received full support and encouragement from his Pastor. So Don Bosco plunged headlong into the fray as if to make up for lost time. Eighty-three editions were either signed or duly acknowledged by him and he revised, corrected and published another sixty. He chose his collaborators carefully, amongst whom were Don Frassinetti, the Prior of Santa Sabina in Genoa, Fr. Martinengo C.M., Padre Secondo Franco S.J., Canon Laurence Gastaldi . . . Pius IX endowed the works with spiritual favours as Don Bosco is careful to note in April 1858. The *Civiltà Cattolica* had words of high praise for this new publication, presenting its "small booklets, full of solid instruction, adapted to the ordinary people and most opportune for these times."

In 1874, in a document destined for the Holy See, Don Bosco was able to state that "the *Catholic Readings* are now in their 20th year. The number of subscribers was never less than 10,000. The approximate number of books printed and distributed over these years reached the 6 million mark" (MB X,945). A careful and prolific writer, Don Bosco did not forget the importance of the written word. His catechetical apostolate for the good of young people led him to give some strong recommendations. "Bear this well in mind: never read books the suitability of which you are not sure—always seek advice from those who are good judges in this matter. For God's sake, do not read books which are not suitable for your age or the circumstances in which you find yourself and which, therefore, can do you quite a lot of harm." (MB XII,149). He gives the same sort of advice to those who



had passed on to him certain books.

His catechetical concern in this matter led him to formulate a plan to organize a lay editorial board. Don Bosco indicated that he had a good grasp of the situation and was well aware of the real dangers that bad reading can do to young people, perhaps unwittingly attracted by "the strange titles, the fine printing and presentation, the attractive illustrations, the low price, popularity of style, variety of plots or vivid descriptions." (This is a *Circular to Co-operators.*)

## Church history

In the October of 1845 midst a whirlwind of activities and preoccupations (the beginning of the Oratory without a fixed abode, his first difficulties with both the civil and ecclesiastical authorities, misunderstandings, ridicule . . .) Don Bosco brought to completion a *Church History*, a volume of 898 pages.

With the eyes of a critical student he had already examined several books but was not satisfied with any of them: either they were too voluminous, or too apologetic, or too partial, or even . . . too ecclesiastical! Don Bosco wrote this book in dialogue form. "In this book Don Bosco poured out all his faith and love for the popes" (*MB II,258*). Again the biographer writes: "In Don Bosco's eyes the Pope stood for everything most dear and worthy of love in the world. He was more jealous of the Pope's honour than his own" (*MB II,259*).

In this writing is revealed the epic glory of the Church. It vibrates with devotion towards that which is the real continuation of Christ on earth. For Don Bosco there seemed no more natural and necessary thing in the world than to defend this Church. "I do not think that anything could be more important and, at the same time, more satisfying to anyone born and reared in the Catholic Church than a history which presents this religion's early beginnings and growth, and clearly describes its spread and consolidation in the face of much opposition" (*MB II,258*).

He enumerates the virtues of so many popes, he sings the



glories and the triumphs over heresies along the centuries, he acclaims the innumerable exploits of the saints. And all this in a context of dazzling light: no mention of the Church's 'semper reformanda'; if there are some dark spots, it comes from those who, abandoning the fold of Christ, have become lost sheep without a shepherd.

However the overall impression one gains is a fine one. It is hard not to be overwhelmed by Don Bosco's enthusiasm. Passing over certain less edifying aspects, yet never lacking in truth, he hides those things almost out of an instinct of modesty. For him the Church must be resplendent in the eyes of the boys "without stain or wrinkle."

Needless to say that this *Church History* "was found to be ideally suited for children, because of the judicious selection of material, its easy style and its chaste expressions. It was favourably received and widely used in schools to the great benefit of youngsters, whose welfare was the paramount thought and aspiration of Don Bosco" (MB II,261).

### Bible history

Seeing the very positive reaction to his *Church History*, Don Bosco, two years later (1847), sent to the press another work, perhaps more demanding but very necessary: a *Bible History*, amounting to 216 pages, written in apologetic style, with the aim of instilling respect for revealed truth. As an answer to the protestants who accused the catholics of not knowing the Bible, Don Bosco placed this book in the hands of thousands of students. It was a book not only in line with the latest exegesis but complete in itself. It underlined the existence of truths attacked by the protestants and showed how they were based on solid biblical foundations. For example, the existence of purgatory, external worship, necessity of good works for salvation, the Real Presence . . .

His *Bible History* is a highly valuable catechetical work both because it draws on the Word of God as well as Don Bosco's apostolic preoccupation which encouraged him to deduce from every fact, told in simple language and without too much detail, some educative maxim, e.g. writing of



Joseph being released from prison and made Prime Minister: "The Lord knows how to use everything for the good of those who love Him."

In the preface, Don Bosco writes: "No other study is more important than this one, nor should anyone who truly loves his faith prefer any other subject to this" (MB II,311). His work was truly crowned with outstanding success; many schools began using it immediately. By 1901 it had gone through 23 editions, 60,000 copies in all.

On the eminently catechetical value of the biographies of some of his best boys I purposely say nothing, both because there is little to add to Fr. Caviglia's fundamental studies and because I have already made frequent reference to them in dealing with other themes.

Never in all this frantic activity was there the slightest interest in monetary gain. As a matter of fact, Don Bosco made this strong statement: "I am not worried about the expense, I only want to distribute good books" (MB VII,414). On this occasion he had reprimanded the head of the printing department: "All I want is to spread good publications. Money is secondary. We still do not understand each other. You know that Don Bosco needs money and you want to help but I realize the need for good books and care little for money" (MB VII,414). Even as far as equipment and modern methods were concerned Don Bosco always wanted to be in the vanguard of progress. Now we can understand what Don Bosco meant when he wrote in his Spiritual Testament (September 1884): "In my preaching, in my talks, in the books I had printed I always did everything possible to sustain, defend and propagate catholic doctrine" (MB XVII, 265). He repeated these ideas, even more forcibly, in a *Circular to Co-operators* in the following year: "Among the means which I warmly recommend for the glory of God and the salvation of souls is the distribution of good books. I do not hesitate to call this *divine* work . . . Good books, distributed among the people, are one of the most apt means to keep alive the reign of the Saviour in so many souls." There followed a brief report on activities so far and their results: "In less than thirty years I have distributed about 20 million books or pamphlets . . . This distribution of good books is



one of the main aims of the Congregation . .

“With the *Catholic Readings*, whilst the aim is to educate all the people, we try to enter into the homes, to make the spirit of our schools known, to attract young people to live lives of virtue especially by putting before them the life of Savio, Besucco and the like. With the *Companion of Youth* we sought to bring them into the Church, to instil the spirit of piety into them and to make them keen on the frequentation of the sacraments. With the collection of *Italian and Latin classics* and with the *History of Italy* and with other historical and literary books, I wanted to sit beside them at their desks and preserve them from so many errors and passions that would prove fatal for them in time and eternity. I long to return to those days when I joined in their recreations and I have in mind a series of books suitable to their needs. Finally, with the *Salesian Bulletin*, among its many ends, was this: to keep alive in the minds of young people who have returned to their families the love of the spirit of St. Francis of Sales and his maxims and so make them the saviours of so many more young people. I do not say that I have reached the ideal of perfection but I urge you to co-ordinate everything so that the work will be complete.”

Here was a humble and open confession of a faithful and prudent servant who had contributed, also in this field, all his great talents and this without setting himself any limits.

### Letter writing

Don Bosco always used letter writing as a means, and a very important one, of doing good. This is made clear in his spiritual treatment. We are not considering letter writing based on an outstanding literary or artistic style. His letters were written in a hurry “put down on paper without the least suspicion that they would pass out of the hands of those to whom they were written.” They were written for practical purposes with the idea of immediacy which pervades and transforms them. There is no philosophical, social and, much less, ascetical intent. We have before us, as Fr. Ceria wisely remarks, a “considerable quantity of letters which



address themselves to the drama of actual life."

The affirmation of Fr. Lemoyne, according to which "we do not know of a single letter in which either the name of God, or of the Church, or the Blessed Mother do not appear" may be exaggerated. Yet, all the same, we must agree with the global judgement of this faithful and accurate historian, Fr. Ceria, who states: "he who reads many of these letters, feels his soul inundated with a special disposition to peaceful thoughts" (MB XIV,557).

Don Bosco used his pen to write letters with the same catechetical spirit as he heard confessions or preached. In this sense, we find justifiable and well-founded Fr. Lemoyne's observation: Don Bosco in keeping up his correspondence "had in mind the glory of the Lord," and so "in these writings there is always apparent his union with God" (MB V,404).

### Don Bosco, the journalist

As a reaction against the anti-christian newspapers, the comics full of immoral and sacrilegious sketches, the bishops presented a strong protest to the Minister. Their document was read in the Senate and the House to the accompaniment of yawns, snide remarks and sneers. We are in the troubled and uneasy 1849!

So several catholic papers were started up. For his part, Don Bosco "had the idea of a periodical that would appeal to the less well-educated." As a name for it he chose *The Friend of Youth*. It was to be a family paper, written for the young and the simple, namely those who were most under attack. It was to be a political-religious paper and would not be afraid to make—according to the style of that time—harsh attacks on opposing papers. The paper had a short life. Notwithstanding intelligent propaganda and a good administration the paper only lasted for eight months. With No.61, it was merged with another paper, the *Instructor of the People*. Don Bosco came out of this experience with the conviction that he was not called to be a journalist. He saw his time, his precious time, taken up for hours on end with the study of politics, economics, law, etc. He could not do it



personally but he immediately tried to form someone else and directed him to this mission, a field the importance of which "not many catholics were convinced" (MB III, 334-345).



## *Chapter Four*

### **The Catechetical-Penitential Work of Don Bosco**

The originality of Don Bosco in penitential catechesis does not consist so much in the novelty of what he wrote or said or did, as in his apostolic ardour, his loving insistence, his paternal reminders, his kindly and sympathetic presentation of confession, if his long experience in this field did not give him much room for optimism.

Don Bosco was a priest essentially for boys. Therefore, he did not preach an easy, condescending, non-demanding type of christianity. His tactics were to immediately "assault" young people by presenting them with the thorny problems of salvation, of a happy or unhappy eternity. He put holiness before them decisively and courageously. Sin turns everything upside-down: a wrong choice leads to setting out in a wrong direction. And if the whole of a christian life is a continual conversion, it is more so for young people, exuberant and inexperienced. Don Bosco knew this quite well; his daily experience in the confessional reminded him of this continually. A young person sins, and the young person has a continual need of feeling that he is pardoned, re-embraced, re-integrated into a loving communion with the Father. And here again Don Bosco is faithful to God who takes the initiative in the matter of salvation and so stands by a young person who believes in the salvific love of God.



## Centrality of confession

His penitential catechesis then became something that was extremely important; something that Don Bosco put at the very centre of all his priestly concern.

In the Apostolic Process for Don Bosco's beatification, Fr. Michael Rua testified: "If he was to give the Good-Night to the pupils of the Salesian school on two consecutive nights one of them would be on confession, and if he could address them only once, unfailingly he would say something about it, too" (MB X,7).

Don Bosco himself was much more explicit as is evidenced from this extract from his *Life of Francis Besucco*: "Say what you like about various systems of education but I have never found any other basis but frequent confession and Communion. I do not think that I am exaggerating when I say that, if these elements are missing, you can say 'good-bye' to morality." His boys knew he would never miss out on an occasion to speak of this sacrament. His first biographer wrote: "For Don Bosco religious festivals, play-time, games, vocal and instrumental music, raffles, and schools were but means to accomplish one purpose: getting his boys to make good and frequent confessions" (MB III,104). He went, with all simplicity and naturalness, from the noisy atmosphere of the playground to the deep silence of the chapel, to a calm and cordial conversation that engendered confidence and trust.

There is a certain gradation in his penitential catechesis. The point of departure was to get the boys to go to confession, necessitating, in many cases, an overcoming of a natural shyness. Again in his *Life of Francis Besucco*, Don Bosco wrote: "That laziness which you sometimes feel, that uncertainty about going to confession, that putting off from day to day are so many temptations of the devil. Knowing how powerful and efficacious frequent confession is in overcoming our defects, he uses every trick he knows to keep you away from it."

The point of arrival is much more demanding. A clearcut appeal to holiness, step by step, beginning from an invitation to regularity and leading on to a personal commitment by means of a sincere confession based on sorrow and firm reso-



lutions; then to a choice of a stable confessor to whom the penitent will remain united by obedience and particularly with a deep confidence in his spiritual direction.

Don Bosco gave himself completely to his boys and demanded all in return: the collaboration of the will, docility of the mind and unconditional affection of the heart.

A certain type of literature which insists on presenting Don Bosco as a simple, lovable acrobat from Becchi has done a tremendous amount of damage. What was true of a happy and carefree period of his life should not warp a judgement of his more mature days when we see him as a decisive, exacting educator of souls, the former of little, yet big saints. His catechesis becomes more dynamic when he treats of confession—in his hands this sacrament becomes the most apt means for guiding young souls.

Fr. Lemoyne writes: "For him hope, mercy and confession were synonomous" (*MB* II,124). This is quite an important statement. Don Bosco knew that the young person is easily discouraged and, as a victim of a sad kind of narcissism in reverse, he starts tearing himself to pieces. He must be helped to gain his self-confidence and thus recover his happy and serene life in the Church. Above all, he must be helped to regain a feeling that God loves him. I have not found—and I am sorry for that—in all Don Bosco's abundant penitential catechesis one reference to the parable for the prodigal son. His catechesis is entirely centred on the crucifix. His preoccupation is to put before the young, who are so thoughtless, the bloody wounds of Christ, our Saviour.

If there is no express reference to God, the Father, the pressure of Don Bosco in the confessional is a reflection of God's paternal love, of whose pardon he is the minister and dispenser. He spent hour after hour hearing his boys' confessions (many times 10 to 12 hours consecutively). It was a tiring work that he would never renounce, yet bearing in mind what Fr. Lemoyne says: "The tribunal of penance was for him a place of repose and joy, and not of fatigue" (*MB* III,54). His was a complete availability and the boys corresponded with a complete trust. On his return from his frequent trips, after having affectionately greeted the superiors and boys and having been informed of what had happened in his absence, he would invariably end up with an invitation:



“And tomorrow morning those who want to go to confession know where they can find me.”

An example amongst so many. In 1870, from the 20th January to the 25th February, Don Bosco was in Rome. On his return, noted the keeper of the chronicle: “On the Saturday and the Sunday of Lent and for days following Don Bosco heard confessions for hours on end, his boys happy to be able to open their hearts to him once more” (MB IX,430).

This is also a precious remark the saint made in his *Memoirs of the Oratory* (page 131): “It was a great consolation for me to see during the week and especially around feastdays my confessional surrounded by forty or fifty lads waiting for hours to go to confession.”

Notable, also, a remark that the saint passed to the boys on the 4th June, 1867: “I remember that in Dominic Savio’s time, on Saturdays I used to hear confessions until eleven at night and on Sundays until nine in the morning. Now a mere handful come to confession and always the same ones” (MB VIII,352). “It was a great consolation for me” makes us think of the fervour of his first years of ministry but that same fervour accompanied him to the grave. The last time he heard his boys’ confessions was the 18th December, 1887—there were more than thirty of them. Don Bosco was a very sick man and was experiencing great difficulty in breathing but he did not refuse. “It will be the last time I can hear their confessions.” And to his secretary: “Let them come along” (MB XVIII,480).

Big numbers were not a problem for Don Bosco. He had his own system. He did not encourage long confessions. He wanted a sincere and complete confession and, above all, demanded that the penitent should not lay the blame on someone else.

• For his part, a few words, well-weighed and incisive; then a suitable, but not stereotyped, penance that was related to the concrete realities of daily life. That was all. You may find some of the pieces of advice given in MB IX,2-3; XIV, 712-714.

There was always to remain in Don Bosco’s mind one outstanding conviction. He explained this to his Salesians in 1875: “How difficult it is to do good to souls! I, even at



the age of sixty, am painfully aware of the difficulties that are encountered in hearing the confessions of children! And this despite the fact that Don Bosco has been given a certain amount of enlightenment" (MB XI,288).

This is a statement that reveals his mentality and, at the same time, gives an example of the kind of catechesis he gave, over so many years, to his priests. He did it with his usual modesty that allowed for no pontificating in matters where he himself felt he was "but a poor and humble disciple." His solid and simple teaching is contained in chapter five of his *Life of Michael Magone*.

This catechesis is completed in another biography, this time of Francis Besucco, in which he gives three pieces of advice that experience had taught him:

"1. Zealously promote frequent confessions as a support for unstable youth, giving them all the means by which they may make good use of this sacrament;

2. Insist upon the importance of a good choice of confessor;

3. Do not forget to remind them frequently of the secrecy of the confessional."

In the mind of Don Bosco the confessor of the young cannot become just a distributor of easy absolutions. He cannot be any old priest—he must be competent, loving, patient and well-balanced. In a word, an educator in the fullest sense of the term. He must be one who is able to draw from the rich potential of the penitent a free choice, a responsible commitment to growth in the spirit. For Don Bosco it is very clear that there is an objective limit for a confessor and his ministry, beyond which he cannot go without the positive co-operation of the penitent.

"Not all confessors have the skill, experience and means to search consciences and flush out the foxes that gnaw at the roots. A priest may be an excellent confessor for adults but not for boys. For the fruitful confession of young people, a priest would find it helpful to go to them, mingle with them, come to know their inclinations and even, on occasion, make an examination of conscience for them" (MB VI,522).

For Don Bosco the confessor must be essentially a father particularly if he is in contact with young people. He does



not stress so much the rigid authority of a father (whilst demanding obedience, for sure) but the aspects of goodness and compassion. His paternity was not one that suffocates the manly growth of the soul but a discreet, prudent, prompt and disinterested friendship. We will have to come back to this aspect, which is so important, if we are to understand the characteristic originality of his penitential catechesis.

### A life commitment

The invitation by Don Bosco to frequent confession goes hand in hand with his appeal for a style of christian life that becomes a real commitment. Here again his catechesis follows the same pattern: solid and simple. "He who thinks little about his soul, goes to confession once a month; he who wants to save his soul, but is not very worked up about it, goes once a fortnight; he who wants to be perfect, goes every week. More often, no, except when one has something heavy upon his conscience" (*MB XII*,566). The insistence upon the obligation to "bear fruit" has its justification. Don Bosco thought of christianity, not in abstract terms, but in the concrete day-to-day living out of one's life. It is true that "it is not the frequency of going to confession that makes one good, but the fruits derived from it" (*MB VII*,56) so it follows logically that "the confessions that bear no fruit are not good confessions" (*MB XII*,573) and "if the confessions bear no fruit it is to be feared that they are either sacrilegious or null" (*MB XII*,574). "Its fruit must be amendment" (*MB IX*,281). That which Don Bosco feared most—and he made explicit reference to it in a conference to Salesians in 1878—is that, by not making good use of this sacrament, there would follow, as a tragic consequence, an indifference for confession, followed by a dislike and, later on, by a refusal to make use of it.

Don Bosco could not imagine a confession made merely out of habit. He was not a rigourist or a laxist nor was he superficial. He was extremely well-balanced. To his boys he said: "Some complain they always have the same acts of disobedience, the same fits of temper, the same wasting of time, the same bad thoughts which have not been dis-



missed, the same bad speech . . . confessions and sins . . . confessions and sins!"

Don Bosco was not satisfied with a mere mechanical reception of the sacrament. "It is not enough to go often but we must aim at sinning no more" (MB VIII,20).

Concerning the frequency Don Bosco had very strong views. "No one should go to confession more than once a week. There are some, especially among the younger boys, who would like to go every day. If all keep to this rule there will be time for everyone" (MB XII,31). Experience soon taught him that there were exceptions because "some can go for eight days, or ten days, without falling into a certain fault, others fifteen or twenty. But there are those who cannot go for more than three or four days—these should go to confession more frequently until they have conquered themselves" (MB XII,566).

Face to face with little fruit from many confessions, Don Bosco thought deeply and discovered two main reasons. First of all, it is useless to expect a reform if one is satisfied with a kind of life that does not demand commitment, that is not serious, that is not virile. Conversion only takes place in the soul of a young person when he resolutely makes up his mind to change direction, to cease repeating the same sins. Most of the work is done outside of the confessional. Approaching this sacrament with the right dispositions, the process of interior reform has its beginnings but in every case it is necessary "to cut off any bond that may keep one tied to the devil" (MB XII,574). For Don Bosco, a young person who accepts sin as a fact of life, betrays and annuls, at its very source, the real effects of a christian catechesis.

The second fact, following on from the first is to be found in the three elements that constitute the essence of the sacrament: sincere accusation, sorrow, and a firm resolution to sin no more.

#### a) *A sincere accusation*

About the sincerity of confessions in general, Don Bosco had his doubts. He said with regret: "Boys do keep back things in confession. Indeed they do. Their two great enemies are shame and the fear of losing their confessor's esteem" (MB VI,522).



All his catechesis as regards silence is to be found in a very sad page written especially for boys. It is to be found in the biography of *Michael Magone*, chapter five: "In the first place I recommend that you always confess each and every sin without allowing yourself to be convinced by the devil to be silent. Always remember that the confessor has power from God to remit every kind of sin, any number of sins. The more serious the sins confessed, the happier his heart will be because he knows quite well that the mercy of God, by which your sin will be pardoned, will be manifested all the more and that the infinite merits of the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ, by which He will wash away the sins from your soul, will be the more abundantly applied.

My dear young people, remember that the confessor is a father who ardently desires to help you as much as possible and who tries to keep you far from every evil . . . I can assure you that the more open and sincere you are with him, the greater his confidence in you will become and the more likely he will be in a position to give you the best possible advice for the welfare of your soul . . . I assure you, my dear young friends, that as I pen these lines my hand trembles as I think of the great number of christians who are eventually lost because they either did not confess their sins or were insincere in confession."

It could be said that Don Bosco was not so much afraid of a sacrilegious confession in itself as of the real danger that this would be the first of a chain of such confessions that would become difficult to break. During the *First General Chapter* in 1877, he spoke of his own experience, backing up what he said with cold statistics: "It would make you cry to see the state of conscience of nine out of every ten boys. Even when everything is made easy for them they do nothing about it! We must be convinced that when a young person has the misfortune to have something serious on his conscience and lets it remain there for years, there is no solemnity, nor retreat, no death of a companion that will have any effect upon him" (*MB XIII*,270).

When someone wanted to make a general confession Don Bosco demanded real sincerity and a thorough preparation. It can easily be seen why. It was a matter of putting down a firm foundation so as not to return over that ground



again. Only after that could the building process begin and the marvellous adventure of friendship with the Lord be initiated. To the Rectors of his Houses, in 1876, Don Bosco put before them some precise points learned from his own vast experience: "Unfortunately, long experience has convinced me that there is a need for all those boys who come into our colleges to make a general confession or, at least, such a confession would be most advisable . . . Believe me, I am not exaggerating when I say that perhaps 50% of the boys entering our colleges for the first time need to make a general confession. And to make sure that they do this properly there is need of charity, more charity and still more charity. It is almost necessary to drag out by force what they should confess" (*MB* XII,91). In his biography of *Michael Magone* Don Bosco does not fail to include a dramatic chapter entitled: "Difficulties and moral reform." Magone was not a bad boy. The most that could be said was that he was a little difficult due to his sad experience on the street and his going with bad companions. After a month at the Oratory, the boy became restless, or, as Don Bosco puts it, suffered from 'dissatisfaction.' Don Bosco intervened with tact and common good sense.

The crisis of shame, disrespect for the sacrament, all his little tormenting secrets . . . all came out. The immeasurable joy of grace and peace flooded the heart of the little rebel.

Among the many reasons for so many insincere confessions, Don Bosco expressly pinpointed the fear of losing the esteem of the confessor or shame at having to confess certain sins.

There is also a third reason and this does not depend on the penitent: the unsuitability of certain confessors. Don Bosco stresses this in a familiar conversation (*MB* VI,522). For this reason he stresses, on the part of the confessor, the need of a psychological study of the boy, made with love and sincerity. Not just confessions en masse, therefore. If he is exacting on his penitents, he is no less so with his confessors. From them he demands, besides kindness and unlimited patience, a serious preparation. Sincerity is the first step towards making a good confession. Don Bosco insisted upon this.

In the manual of piety he placed in the hands of his



boys, he stresses another motive of great psychological importance: secrecy on the part of the confessor.

#### b) *Sorrow*

For Don Bosco sorrow was translated concretely into "I will sin no more." For a good confession there must be a decisive break with sin and a constant insertion into the mystery of the dead and risen Christ.

In a catechetical writing of 1858, he asked: "What is important in order to make a good confession?" and he follows up with a reply which illustrates his whole system and methodology: "Excite yourself to real sorrow and make a firm proposal not to offend God any more in the future." His catechesis of sorrow is solid, practical and, we may even say, severe. He did not get lost in useless arguments and did not go in for cheap sentimentality. He was not interested in superficial sorrow or a sorrow dictated by any hidden emotions. His recommendations were down-to-earth: "Between confessions, strive not to commit sins. This will be the best fruit of your confessions" (*MB* VIII,20).

Sorrow will be all the more true and deep-seated in proportion to its demanding from the penitent a courageous resolution to sin no more.

#### c) *Firm resolution*

Don Bosco saw the sacrament of penance as a kind of spiritual exercise, something extremely active and demanding. The fruit of confession is conversion. To this end he orientated sorrow and resolution which he always linked together in a strict logical connection, even if he was intimately convinced that these are the "very things that are ordinarily missing in children's confessions" (*MB* I,121). The saint is coherent in his catechetical principles. He feared too frequent confessions. He feared the forming of a habit that might eventually lead to a keeping away from or a possible refusal of confession. He feared, above all, a long series of confessions that would be reduced to a boring list of faults constantly repeated and confessed without sorrow.

To him who claimed that he had to go to confession frequently because he wanted to correct himself, he used to answer quite bluntly: "The time you spend in going to con-



fession the second or third time in the same week could be better spent in making a firm resolution. You will see that this is a more efficacious means than over-frequent confessions because these will be made with less and less sorrow and less and less firm resolutions to sin no more" (*MB XII,31*).

The commitment which Don Bosco invited his boys to make was, to his way of thinking, the mainspring that would launch them on the way of personal and decisive renewal. He had a very exact theological idea of sacramental grace. It was not something which grows with the number of mechanical acts, performed out of habit but a life, even life itself, deposited in the heart of every christian as a seed destined to bear abundant fruit (cf. *MB IX,279-281*). Young people do not speak out because of a sense of shame. They resist the action of grace with insufficient sorrow and so cannot come to a definite conversion. Their resolutions are verbalized but not carried out. Faced with this discouraging picture the confessor must react. Only with love, kindness and understanding can he manage to solve this difficult problem (cf. *MB VII,124*).

The confessor must be accepted as a sincere friend, more than a father, by the boys. The most beautiful and original pages of Don Bosco's catechesis are to be found when he treats of this topic. And, in the presentation of the confessor as a friend, he points out heights that are difficult to reach; it is a catechesis all his own, something very personal but very efficacious. Love invites confidence. In his contacts with young people in confession Don Bosco forged links of friendship, affection and confidence. He never tired of saying to his boys: "Your confessor is the friend of your soul; therefore, I suggest that you have the greatest trust in him. Tell him all the secrets of your heart. Have no fear that he will ever reveal anything he has heard" (*MB III,457*).

The trust that a boy had in Don Bosco was abundantly recompensed. "It is only right that if someone opens his heart to me, I should open my heart to him" (*MB X,5*). A friendly contact is so captivating that a boy feels at ease and opens his heart. A boy knows he has everything to gain by making a priest a sharer in his secret dramas and sense of



confusion. The heart of the penitential catechesis of Don Bosco is his parental love because the confessor is "a friend that desires nothing else but the good of your soul." There is a dialogue, certainly reconstructed by Fr. Lemoyne, but which doubtless reflects, all the same, Don Bosco's mentality and helps us to understand his catechetical style in approaching a boy who wants to go to confession. It merits quotation in full because, in a succession of suggested motives, it takes on more and more a note of personal concern and confidence:

"Why do you want to go to confession?"

To be in the state of grace once more.

Good. That's what matters most. But is this your only reason?

To gain merit.

Any other reason?

Because the Lord wants me to go.

Anything else?

The boy did not know what else he could say, so I would say:

And also because it pleases Don Bosco who is your friend and wants to help you" (*MB* III,110).

It must be remembered that it was a sacrosanct law in the saint's system of education that everyone must "make himself loved if he wants to be loved." This can be done by words or can be better done by actions so that the boys realize that everything is being done for their moral and temporal welfare.

Here pious intentions and general good will are not sufficient; young people detect with mysterious precision the concern of their confessor as they appreciate his sincerity and dedication and so become the best judges of their educators. Don Bosco says quite bluntly: "If you want your words to impress the boys, you must at all times erase your ego. Boys can see through you. If they spot jealousy, envy, or pride in a superior or a preoccupation to outshine others that superior's influence is finished. Lack of humility always undermines unity; a superior's selfishness can spell ruin" (*MB* VI,215).

Supernatural charity and disinterested love of souls was not the final goal of Don Bosco's penitential catechesis. He carried on energetically. He had other goals to reach. If the



confessor is a firm friend of the penitent, he must probably become his regular confessor.

### A regular confessor

One of the fruits of confession must be a firm christian commitment. Don Bosco insisted much upon this. He disapproved of a going from confessor to confessor in search of an indulgent one. "Until you have a regular confessor in whom you have full confidence you will be missing out on a real friend for your soul" (*Life of Michael Magone*). So he gives this fatherly advice: "Choose a confessor in whom you can place all your trust." The teaching of Don Bosco in this matter is quite clear. He was well aware "that the biggest stroke of good luck for a boy is the discovery of a regular confessor to whom he can open his heart, a confessor who will look after his soul, who will encourage him with love to frequent this sacrament" (*Life of Francis Besuc-co*).

Experience had taught him that "there are those who continually change their confessor but never get around to changing their lives. They are like sick people who are forever changing their doctor. How can these hope to be cured? A doctor must first of all know the sickness and all its manifestations if he is not to make a mistake which will be your loss and your fault. Decide on a regular confessor and open yourself up to him and at the moment of death you will be very happy" (*MB VIII,352*).

There is a problem in adolescence which, both for the delicacy of the matter and the immaturity of the penitent, can end up by becoming a real torment: the struggle for purity.

Don Bosco was well aware of this struggle but knew that, if the penitent had the humility, the courage and the constancy to open up his heart to one confessor, he could solve the problem or, could at the very least, help himself find an answer to the problem. There is a very important statement of Don Bosco in this regard: "I know of nothing that will cause more damage (than changing confessors), because here it is not just a matter of receiving absolution



but of getting direction. Any confessor can give absolution but how can he direct an individual if he only confesses ordinary things and leaves out more serious matters" (MB XII,565). Needless to say that the stability of a confessor always respects the penitent's liberty on one side and the sacramental integrity on the other. "Rather than make a sacrilegious confession and Communion change your confessor several times" (MB VI,185). A regular confessor becomes a necessity when confession is followed by spiritual direction.

### Spiritual direction

Don Bosco "would never accept the fact that one goes to confession for nothing else but absolution. He would accept that only in urgent cases or when one finds difficulty in being sincere with one's confessor. That is, he condemned confession divorced from spiritual direction and moral profit" (Fr. Braido: *The Preventive System*, page 285).

The lack of a spiritual director which he felt in his own formative years and at the time when he had to make important decisions made him, when he was ordained a priest, insist upon this fundamental means for the formation of a convinced christian. "Until I came to the Convitto Ecclesiastico, I had no real guide in my spiritual life. I always did what seemed best, but I'm sure I would have made greater progress if I had had a regular and diligent spiritual director" (MB I,237).

A writer of a very forceful study of Don Bosco, Fr. Caviglia, affirms that "Don Bosco had the blood of a spiritual director running in his veins." He did not fix any time or place—for him true catechesis uses every time and every place for spiritual direction. His experience did not always come from books, from principles that he had borrowed from some author or other. Here, as in so many other things, he followed his own method, very personal and very original. We may go so far as to say that he knew them by instinct. The whole spirit which pervaded his confessional was one of serenity. It immediately set at peace the young person who, carried away by his passions and feeling downhearted by his



failure, could have given way to gloom and pessimism. Whilst he demanded complete openness and sincerity from his penitents he, in his turn, responded with all his being, with all his strong and virile love (cf. *MB XVIII*, 476 to realize Don Bosco's fear that his love might have been misinterpreted). He surrounded the young person with fatherly interest, without mawkishness, without burdening him with his own doubts and personal crises. His personal talks with his boys were short, both because he was very busy as well as because of his own style of acting, to which the boys responded with a similar openness. That these talks were generally short we might deduce from what Dominic Savio wrote to his father, about a year after he had come to the Oratory: "I have a very unusual piece of news to give you . . . This news is that I have had an hour's talk with Don Bosco although in the past I was never more than ten minutes with him."

Don Bosco's catechesis was never an abstract one. He believed in young people and took them seriously. However his actions were always characterized by love: "Familiarity breeds affection and affection breeds confidence. It opens the hearts and young people approach their teachers, assistants and superiors without fear. They open out in the confessional and outside of the confessional" (*MB XVII*, 108).

So the dialogue begun in the confessional on the foundation of mutual trust, respect and kindness is carried on elsewhere without any artificial barrier of time or place. The young person opens up without any attempt to be anything but himself.

Even if, in fact, the confessional was envisaged and adopted by Don Bosco as the most suitable place to guide souls, yet it must be said that he created frequent occasions for spiritual direction outside of the confessional. He demanded from the confessor a real professional expertise where there were no improvisations, no superficiality, no presumption, nor any false fear, the fruit of uncertainty and incapacity.

The norms for spiritual directors which he laid down are very demanding. He once was asked what qualifications a Rector should have (in his mind the Rector was the spiritual director 'ex officio'). He answered: "A Rector needs most of all to enjoy the full trust of his pupils. To achieve this, it



is necessary that:

1. He be esteemed as a saint;
2. He be considered knowledgeable, especially in those things that interest boys;
3. Pupils must realize that they are being loved. (*MB* II, 161-2).

So, as the basis of all this it is necessary that his ascendancy be not based on exteriors that easily strike the young person at first sight but on interior qualities.

There is a talk given by Don Bosco on the evening of the 31st March 1876 that illustrates his thoughts on spiritual direction and shows the saint in catechetical action in the midst of his boys: "This evening I want to express my satisfaction with those who come to have a talk with me in the confessional or in my room. It is not very long ago that many looked upon Don Bosco as a bogeyman and always kept out of his way . . . Always remember that I am delighted that you come to see me, not only in church but outside. I want you to do this not simply because I enjoy talking to you but because you may be able to get a piece of advice from Don Bosco who always does what he can when you visit" (*MB* XII,151).

Confidence is the premise and the ideal atmosphere for spiritual direction. In August 1864, speaking to the boys, he referred to Pythagoras who demanded from his disciples a minute account of their life, and added: "I give you the same advice. Some people think that to start a new life it is enough to open one's heart to a spiritual director and make a general confession. That is fine, but it is not enough . . . Besides fixing up the past we must also provide for the future . . . To make steady progress you must reveal your habitual failings, the occasions which usually lead you into sin, and your dominant evil inclinations. You must attentively and faithfully carry out the advice you are given. You must keep your heart open and fully trusting. You must manifest your needs, temptations and dangers as they rise, so that your director may guide you with a steady hand" (*MB* VII,430-431). With spiritual direction the confessor, from being a friend, becomes a doctor and guide.

For Don Bosco spiritual direction is not only "the



collaboration given by a priest to the development of the disposition of a young person's soul, based solely on intimate conversations that puts at the disposal of the director all that the person knows about himself."

The saint is a man of God whose virtue amounts to heroism. In concrete, especially in the biographies written by him about some of the boys of the Oratory, he underlines some practical points. For example, in Mickey Magone he praises "his exemplary solicitude for the practices of piety" his "punctuality in the performance of his duties," his "devotion to the Virgin Mary, his vigilance "to preserve the virtue of purity" and his "charity" towards his neighbour.

That Don Bosco spoke courageously of holiness and presented it to the boys is a well-known fact. Already in his panegyric for the feast of St. Aloysius in 1844 there is the germ of all the doctrine presented later on. In his life of Dominic Savio the sermon preached by Don Bosco, most likely in 1855, is crucial—it was the spark that "lit up the whole soul for the love of God."

The presence of Savio at the Oratory was for Don Bosco a real grace from God. Spirituality got a boost, the practical apostolate among the boys got a footing and in his giant strides others ran. Don Bosco fully understood its importance and wrote three catechetical biographies to put into the hands of the boys to urge them on.

The holiness suggested by Don Bosco to his boys in his pastoral and catechetical work is simple and adapted to the age of his listeners. "I most heartily recommend simple things that do not frighten or tire people, especially young people. Fasts, long prayers and similar harsh practices are either put aside or endured with reluctance and difficulty. Let us keep to easy things but let us persevere in them" (*Life of Magone*).

The aspect that marks out Don Bosco's holiness and that which he asked of his boys is that of serenity and joy in the service of the Lord. In this regard there is the piece of advice given by the saint to Dominic Savio when that lad took the solemn decision to answer the call to holiness. Don Bosco stressed "a constant and moderate joy, and advised him to persevere in carrying out his duties of piety and study and recommended that he never miss out in the recreations with



his companions."

A quick and superficial reading of this extract has done a lot to present the holiness of Dominic (and, by inference, his master) as a lowering of ideals, a simplistic watering down of means, as a goal easily reached by doing little or nothing.

Instead Dominic understood very well the import of that invitation and revealed the mentality of a true saint when he greeted a newcomer to the Oratory: "For us here holiness means doing all that is necessary to be always in good spirits. We hate and detest sin as something that robs us of God's grace and makes us very unhappy inside. We try to be faithful in all our duties and to be the leaders in the practices of piety." The invitation that Don Bosco put before his boys to become saints was not a joke, a whimsical caricature; it was not a matter of mere words, something superficial, a 'showing-off.' It was meant to commit the boy in those areas compatible with his age: play, study, piety. These are the three areas he pointed out to Francis Besucco "If you want to be good you must do three things and do them well—*You must be joyful—you must study—you must be pious.* This is your programme which, if practiced, will make you happy and do a lot of good to your soul."

He is demanding. He insists on a sense of duty because fidelity to the duty of one's state is a sure thermometer to correctly gauge a boy's desire for holiness.

Otherwise there is the danger that holiness becomes something sentimental, something passing. The biographies of his boys that he wrote contain some precious comments.

Of Savio he notes with obvious satisfaction: "For some time the tenor of his life was nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing to be noted in particular except an exact observance of the rules of the House. He applied himself to his studies. He diligently performed all his duties."

In his life of his seminary companion, Luigi Comollo, he stressed "the exact performance of his duties of prayer and studies."

Michael Magone confesses: "My heart found great pleasure in doing my duties as they were pointed out to me by my superiors or the sound of the bell." It amazes us to note this insistence upon doing one's duty as a sure means of attaining to sanctity for experience tells us "that it is



typical of youth to be fickle and often change their mood about what they are going to do." Even piety is to be suspected if it is not confirmed by a diligent and conscientious performance of duty. This christian way of living, carried on with a spirit of noble precision, is the only path traced out by Don Bosco, so much so that he made the living out of the duties of one's state of life to be a matter of conscience and the slightest transgression of the rules was, in his mind, never without blame. Duty, to his way of thinking, was something sacred and solemn, almost an act of worship. (Cf. Braido: *Il sistema preventivo*, pages 138-143).

His preoccupation with setting his boys on the path to evangelical perfection was not founded on abstract teachings or spiritual acrobatics; he knew that that would not go down with them. Instead, he put models before them and urged them on to imitation.

Presenting the life of Savio, he writes: "In the meantime, reading about Dominic's life, say to yourselves what the great St. Augustine said in similar circumstances: *si ille cur non ego?* (If he can do it why can't I?) That is, if a boy of my age, just like me in every way, who has to meet the same temptations as I have to, could follow Christ with such courage and wholeheartedness, why should I not do the same?"

Sanctity is not a gift distributed at random. Saints are not born; one becomes a saint by collaborating with the graces one receives. It demands work, self-discipline, commitment. Don Bosco had many good and saintly boys, all different yet all the same. In his preface to the life of Magone he makes a very interesting comparison between this lad and Dominic Savio. Sanctity, then, is essentially love. On the lips of the dying Francis Besucco we have an interesting confession: "I feel bitter remorse for not having loved the Lord as I should have loved Him during my life." Don Bosco, commenting on this, said that he would never have imagined that such a thought could have caused so much regret at the hour of death. From a detachment from all that represents a slowing down of building close relations with Christ (the point of departure for every good confession) to that anxiety for sanctity that devoured these young people (the point of arrival of his penitential catechesis) there followed a generous



and efficacious self-discipline. Continually purified, the young person is urged on to new heights.



## Chapter Five

### The Eucharistic Catechesis of Don Bosco

In its principles and practice, Don Bosco's Eucharistic catechesis is solid, theologically well founded and genuinely catholic. Centering it upon a personal participation in the paschal mystery of Christ and in the heart of that mystery, the Holy Mass, he lined himself up with all those who, in anticipation of the great pastoral thrust of Pius X, vigorously argued for the necessity of frequent Communion. This meant giving the faithful ample opportunity to receive frequently and the promotion of early First Communion for children.

In his study of the *Preventive System* he wrote: "Avoid as a plague the opinion that the First Communion should be deferred to a late age, when generally the devil has already gained possession of a boy's heart, with incalculable prejudice to his innocence . . . When a child can distinguish between Bread and bread, and shows sufficient knowledge, give no further thought to his age, but let the heavenly King come and reign in that happy soul."

In a Good-Night of the 20th June 1864 he spoke thus to his boys: "Oh, if only I could implant in your souls this great love from Mary and Jesus in the Mass, how happy I would be! Look, I'll say something very stupid but that does not matter. To gain this I would be prepared to crawl to Superga, dragging my tongue on the ground all the way. It is a stupid proposition but I would do it all the same. My tongue would be torn to shreds but that would not matter:



I would have a house full of saints" (MB VII,410).

Convinced that "frequent Communion and daily Mass are the columns which must support an educational edifice" (MB III,251), the priest-educator Don Bosco developed his whole system upon these two solid pillars. His ideas on this are very clear. He knows that "First Communion is the foundation for a whole life," as he says in his life of Savio. Experience had taught him that an adolescent passes through a period of his life during which "most dangerous passions are developing in him," hence he does not hesitate to exhort his boys: "Go to Communion frequently and fervently. By receiving Christ in your heart frequently, your soul will be reinforced with grace, helping your body to be obedient to the spirit" (MB XII,142).

And if it is true that "devout and frequent Communion is the most efficacious means to die well and so save one's soul" (MB IX,9), it is likewise tragically true that "to keep away from Communion is the same thing as throwing oneself into the arms of satan" (MB VIII,69). Note Don Bosco's remark that, just when a young person needs the sacraments most, he tends to give them away as things of a child (MB VII,124).

The eucharistic doctrine that Don Bosco presented in his writings and sermons is very down-to-earth, adapted to the understanding of the simple whilst being, at the same time, very complete. A breath of humble adoration and deep gratitude for God's plan animates these pages presented to all christians and gives life to what could well be a cold and impersonal presentation of the Church's teaching.

"In the Eucharist Jesus Christ gives us his Body, his Blood, his soul and divinity under the appearances of consecrated bread and wine. This is the great manifestation of Divine power. With an act of deep love for us, God found a way of giving our souls adequate spiritual nourishment, namely His very Divinity" (*Month of May*, 8th Day).

Writing from Rome in February 1870 he gave the boys news of his expected return to the Oratory. Whilst he forbade any external celebrations (we are on the eve of the taking of Rome!), he added: "But give me a feast that would be nearest and dearest to my heart, namely a universal reception of Holy Communion. When we have feasts like that we don't



need anything else" (MB IX,190).

His insistence on frequent Communion could have become tiring if they were not given with all the warmth of his priestly heart, preoccupied only "with the sole thought of winning souls for the Lord." When speaking of the Eucharist, and on no other occasion, he uses an unusual expression, viz. "to fall in love" (cf. MB VII,466).

One evening, in a friendly chat with his boys after tea, he again returned to this topic and posed a question that provoked a lot of thought: "You may ask me how often you should go to Holy Communion? Listen. The Jews, when they were in the desert, ate the manna which fell every day. Now the Gospel tells us that the manna was a figure of the Eucharist and so we should eat every day the food that was prefigured so many years ago in the food the Jews ate in the desert . . . The early christian went to Communion each and every day . . . Holy Church, then, meeting at the Council of Trent, declared it was Her desire that the faithful should go to Communion every time they go to Mass" (MB VII, 408).

At this juncture it may be objected that Don Bosco put pressure on his boys, morally forcing them to go to Communion and thus taking away all personal initiative.

But his keen pedagogical sense made him carry on his catechesis in a much different tone: "Then, you tell me, must we really go to Communion every day? You will object that we are not bound to do that. Jesus Christ longs for it but does not command it. All the same I will give you a piece of advice suitable to your age, condition, devotion; come to an arrangement with your confessor and follow his advice. If you would like to know my wish, it is that you should go every day. Spiritually? The Council of Trent says, sacramentally! Then? Do like this: when you cannot communicate sacramentally, do so at least spiritually" (MB VII,408).

Here we see quite clearly the mind of Don Bosco as regards daily Communion. Full respect for the liberty of conscience. Full use of the ministry and spiritual direction of the confessor.

Another writing (*The Month of May*) sees the saint answering some objections against frequent Communion.



This gives us a glance at a no lesser aspect of his eucharistic catechesis:

“It will be objected: I’m too big a sinner. If you are a sinner you should put yourself in God’s grace by the sacrament of penance and then go to Communion for support.

Another will say: I go only now and again so as to be more fervent when I do go. That is a mistake. It is those things we do seldom that we generally do poorly. You must remember that you need to gain frequent nourishment for your soul because your needs are many.

Again others will say: I am spiritually weak and I don’t dare to go to Communion frequently. Jesus Christ gives you an answer to this objection—those that are well have no need of a doctor. Therefore, those who are sickest need the doctor most of all. Courage then, O christian, if you want to do something glorious for God, something most pleasing to all the saints in heaven, the most efficacious means to overcome temptations, the best guarantee of perseverance in good, go to Communion.”

The centrality of Holy Communion was projected by Don Bosco in its cosmic dimensions. It is a new angle and I feel it is worthwhile noting it. He wrote to a group of boys: “Frequent Communion: What a great truth I am going to expound to you now! Frequent Communion is the great column that sustains both the moral and material universe to prevent it falling down in ruins . . . Believe me, my dear lads, I do not think I am exaggerating when I assert that frequent Communion is the great column on which all the world rests” (To the boys at Mirabello, 30th December 1863 *Epistolario*, Vol 1,299).

### **Liberty as regards Holy Communion**

Don Bosco’s catechesis on frequent Communion must not make us forget a principle from which he never deviated; liberty in approaching the Eucharist. In his Regulations for the Festive Oratory (1846) there is a very explicit article in this regard: “Amongst us there is no compulsion about approaching these two sacraments and this is to allow all to use them through love and not through fear” (*MB* III,162).



In the norms contained in the booklet on the *Preventive System* in the education of the young the saint states quite categorically: "Never force the boys to frequent the sacraments, but encourage them and give them every opportunity" (MB IV,549).

Don Bosco, in his pedagogy, as in his catechesis, had a real respect for the individual person—he appeals to the individual to appreciate the graces offered him and to use them consciously and positively. This respect for the liberty of the young person Don Bosco also demanded from his helpers: "Never quiz youngsters on matters of conscience, never ask an individual if he has been to confession or not, to Holy Communion or not . . . In class, the teachers, whilst reproving the negligent, should never allude to the frequentation of the sacraments as a factor that could be influencing their conduct" (MB X,429).

A feeling of great liberty, therefore, for the making of a convinced and responsible Eucharistic encounter. Don Bosco was keen to remove all appearances of obligation, imposition or supervision in so personal a matter in the life of the boy.

### **Personal commitment in Holy Communion**

Don Bosco's Eucharistic catechesis was not confined to encouraging frequent Communion whilst allowing for perfect liberty to do so. He believed that every meeting with Christ in the Eucharist must have an element of transformation. His catechesis cannot be reduced to a mere going to Holy Communion. He was to say "mere frequentation of the sacraments is no indication of holiness" (MB XI,258). Here, as in confession, he insisted that personal commitment, collaboration with grace, personal ascetical effort must invariably follow.

"Don Bosco did not run the risk, certainly, of giving his boys a mechanical and magical interpretation of the sacraments. His sacramental pedagogy was a most dynamic and committed one. It was aimed at helping boys, who are naturally happy-go-lucky, to overcome superficiality, light-headedness and the tendency to act mechanically" (Braido:



*Il sistema preventivo*, page 266). In him was a healthy balance between 'ex opere operato' and 'ex opere operantis.'

In a Good-Night given on the 3rd March 1865, he made many of his listeners uneasy because they did not understand fully what he was saying and because they did not follow his reasoning that, in every Eucharistic contact, there should be a transformation.

"Make your Communions as you should. You see individuals who have the courage to go to Holy Communion without any intention whatsoever of correcting their faults. They think nothing of wasting hours in idle gossip instead of studying. They go to Communion in the morning and then, during the day, carry on unworthy conversations with their companions. They grumble about this or that person, of this or that Superior or talk about their companions. They are a complete nuisance to the assistant in the dormitory and elsewhere. How can any one of these have been really good Communions? . . . I know we cannot become perfect all at once and only by constant and strong efforts can we overcome our faults. However, make an effort to get rid of them, make it evident that you are improving, give evidence of your good will by faithful observance of your duties" (MB VIII,37).

On another occasion he returned to the same ideal and insisted: "I would like to see those who go to Holy Communion in the morning not misbehaving during the day. As you see, I do not ask you to do anything difficult" (MB X,139).

It is hard to say whether Don Bosco was more concerned about those who received the Eucharistic Christ with the right dispositions or those who showed themselves unworthy after partaking of the Bread which nourishes.

### **Christ, a friend**

Developing his Eucharistic catechesis, Don Bosco presented to his boys, most of whom were adolescents, Christ as a Friend and Companion on life's journey. We consider this to be one of his great ideas to be able to offer these boys such a sure and faithful friend, a model that every christian



can copy. In fact "no one can say that he belongs to Jesus Christ if he makes no effort to imitate Him. Therefore, in the life and actions of good christians, there must be found the life and action of Jesus Christ Himself" (*La Chiave del Paradiso*, page 20).

On the deathbed of two of his most wonderful boys, perhaps equal in sanctity, we find expressions that show clearly how well they had learnt this lesson. Dominic Savio urged those by his bedside: "Oh, say for all time, say it to everyone: he who has Jesus for a friend and companion need fear nothing, not even death itself."

Ten years after Dominic's death, Don Bosco used this anniversary to speak of a certain coldness amongst the boys in the matter of the frequentation of the sacraments: "Oh, if only Dominic were to come to the Oratory and see how few go to Communion daily, he would certainly say: But is this the Oratory where I once lived? . . . How is it that in my times there were only 150 of us and practically all went to Holy Communion every day. And now? Out of 500 boys, about 60 or 70 go to Holy Communion daily" (*MB VIII*, 350). Michael Magone whispered a humble request to Don Bosco: "Recommend me to the prayers of my companions; ask them to pray that the Sacramental Christ may really be my viaticum, my companion for all eternity."

For his part, talking to the boys (they were really family discussions—simple, informal, almost improvised yet, on close study, we see they followed a strict logical order, each one linked with the other) he never tired of presenting Christ in this light. On the last day of 1875, he gave the Strenna which was to be a personal and community programme of life: "Oh, how much good this Friend will do us. You already understand that I am referring to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Receive Him frequently and with fervour. He is so good. He will never desert you, not even at the hour of death; rather, it is at the hour of death that He will show Himself as a real friend and will come to lead you to Paradise."



## Visits to the Blessed Sacrament

In his Eucharistic catechesis, Don Bosco wanted to lead his boys towards a personal piety, based on deep convictions and responsible choice. He also indicated a collateral devotion: visits to the Blessed Sacrament. It is clearly a practice of piety of Alphonsian origin to which he added his own note of spontaneity. This practice was expressly treated of in a meeting of the General Chapter, at which Don Bosco was present, in 1877 (cf. *MB* XIII,283). He had already recommended it in a Good-Night in 1865: "There is nothing the devil fears more than these two practices: Holy Communion well made and Visits to the Blessed Sacrament. Do you want the Lord to grant you many graces? Visit Him often. Do you want very few graces? Visit Him but rarely. Do you want the devil to assail you? Visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament but rarely. Do you want him to run away from you? Visit Jesus often. Do you want to give the devil a good hiding? Frequently take refuge at the feet of Jesus. Do you want to be beaten? Leave off your visits" (*MB* VIII,32).

On another occasion he developed the same theme, this time in relation to death: "If we really want our meeting at the hour of death to be that of a friend, let us go to find Him frequently and fervently in the Blessed Sacrament and then by keeping Him close to your heart; let us pay Him a visit at those times when we are free; let us offer Him our heart, our will, let us tell Him to do with us whatever He thinks best. He is so good that He will protect us always and will never abandon us" (*MB* XI,492). This atmosphere of unrestrained liberty and generous commitment helped mature in the souls of the boys a close, personal relationship with Christ and that had as its foundation, as Don Bosco used to say to his boys, "the love He has for you and the proofs He has given of His love" (*MB* VI,351).

Towards the end of his life, speaking at Paris to the Assumptionist Fathers, he synthesised his whole pedagogical catechesis: "Kindness at all times and make sure that the chapel is always left open" (*MB* XVI,168).

In his catechetical intent, which he never forgot in all his contacts with young people, Don Bosco recommended



that they "should go into the chapel several times a day" but then, remembering the mobility proper to youngsters, would immediately add "if only for a minute or two" (MB VI,194).

There is a beautiful and homely Good-Night given to his boys by Don Bosco on this very topic: "If an important and trustworthy person were to go into the town square and tell the people who were sitting about there in idle conversation: Go up that hill and you will find a mine of purest gold and you can collect as much as you like, tell me—would there be one single person who would shrug his shoulders and say he was not interested? They would all rush off as quickly as their legs would carry them. Alright! In the tabernacle there is a treasure much greater than you would ever find in heaven or earth. Whatever you ask for, provided it is not harmful to you, will be given you. So go and ask and you will receive. Knock and the door will be opened. Christ wants to give you His graces, especially those for your soul's welfare" (MB VI,171).

### The Mass, the centre of all Don Bosco's catechesis

At a quick reading of what Don Bosco said or wrote about the Mass, one could get the impression of a certain poverty in this respect. But that is not the case. Notwithstanding the inevitable limitations of the time in which he lived, he "had a very good knowledge of the fundamental doctrine of the Eucharistic mystery" and when he dealt with this argument "his words were simple but profound" (Desramaut: *Don Bosco and the Spiritual Life*). In his Eucharistic catechesis he strongly proposed, as the foundation of all his priestly action, "daily Mass which, in line with the almost universal practice in catholic colleges, he made obligatory for all the students" (Braido: *Il sistema preventivo*, page 268). But it was not the custom of Don Bosco to impose something without doing his best to meet the needs of the boys. It is true he had the Rosary recited at all the week-end Masses and that has caused many to decry his anti-liturgical bias. However, in his *Companion of Youth* he prepared a way to fruitfully assist at Mass, which is prefaced by a brief



Instruction to instil "a lofty idea of the Mass" and taught how "To assist at it well" (Braido: *op.cit.* page 85).

His catechesis of the Mass is solid and practical. He did not forget the dual aspect of sacrament and sacrifice. He wrote: "If you want to have an adequate idea of the Holy Mass, transport yourself in thought to the Cenacle where our Saviour celebrates Mass for the first time with His apostles on the vigil of His Passion" (*Month of May*).

But this sacramental aspect soon almost disappears. Don Bosco insists on the second aspect, the Mass as a Sacrifice. His catechesis is here transformed into a moving meditation.

"Understand this well, my dear boys, in assisting at Holy Mass you almost do the same as if you were witnessing our Divine Saviour coming out from Jerusalem, carrying the cross to Mount Calvary where He was crucified amid atrocious torments and where He was to shed the last drops of his Blood. This same sacrifice the priest renews when he celebrates Holy Mass, with this sole distinction that at the Sacrifice of Calvary Jesus Christ sheds His Blood and the Mass in an unbloody manner, that is, there is no shedding of blood" (*Companion of Youth*). In the eyes of Don Bosco "one could not imagine anything more precious, holier or greater than the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ"; hence his insistence in his catechesis on arousing in the young a desire to assist at Mass with love, because "when we assist at Mass, we can do nothing that gives greater glory to God and does more for our souls." But to go to Mass was only a point of departure. His Eucharistic catechesis had a loftier goal. As a matter of fact, there was a dual goal.

The first was to insist on exterior behaviour at Mass—it must be modest, respectful, recollected. It must give evidence of a convinced faith for such an attitude "often made a deeper impression on people than a lengthy sermon" (*MB III,456*).

The second was much more demanding. It is a good thing to go to Mass and a better thing to show forth in one's attitude faith and love, but that is not all. Don Bosco pointed out another goal which he did not hesitate to put courageously before his boys. It is a personal participation in the mystery of Christ, Priest and Victim. And it is here that Don



Bosco reaches a plane all his own. If "the Mass is a great means to placate God's anger and to keep far from us all chastisements" (as Don Bosco states in a Good-Night of the 31st December, 1861) and with "a Mass well assisted at "we may receive so many "graces and blessings," then it is necessary that we respond to God's loving call. So, for Don Bosco, it was not a matter of going to Mass to fulfill an obligation and to be justified in the eyes of God. Mass is not only a listening process. One has to participate in it, must take an active part if one wants to enter into the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ, our Saviour.

The verb 'participate' was a very rare term in ecclesiastical documents not too many years ago yet it turns up quite frequently in his catechesis (cf. for example, *MB* IV, 454; VI, 1071 in the Italian edition).

In his Eucharistic catechesis Don Bosco is faithful to his principles of method: do not waste time on purely theoretical questions, flitting from subject to subject, but concentrate on practicalities. He gave his boys a series of popular explanations of the Mass, all with some concrete objective in mind. On the evening of the last day of 1861 he set out as a practice: "Make a big effort to hear Holy Mass well and let each individual take steps to promote devout attendance at the same" (*MB* VI, 631).

In another chat with his boys after tea, he explained a practical method of participating in the Mass, borrowing it from St. Leonard of Port Maurice. These are the three famous P's (in Italian) into which the Holy Sacrifice may be divided. Up to the Elevation, think of the Passion (the red P); up to the Communion, meditate on Sin or Peccato (the black P); from the Communion onwards, think of Good Resolutions or Proponimenti (the white P) (*MB* VI, 501).

He neglected no means to help the boys discover in the Mass the central point of their christian life. To this end, he made good use of the high points of the Mass, which for him could be reduced to two. The central point, the Communion, we have just looked at.

There was for him, a second, no less important: the Elevation. He had introduced a curious yet typical custom into the Oratory. In a Good-Night in 1862 he said: "Right from the beginning of the Oratory I determined that, at the



Elevation, all noise and singing and praying was to stop. Do you know why I did this? Because at the precious moment you should have an occasion, without being disturbed, of asking the Lord for the virtue of modesty" (*MB VII*,56).

Also in this field, his Eucharistic catechesis displayed the constants within which Don Bosco exercised his priestly ministry: solid personal formation, based on a deep-felt and responsible conviction; a healthy activism, by which he allowed young people a breadth of free initiative; a generous apostolate which urged the boy to help his brother, his schoolmates, his playmates.

Don Bosco had a dynamic idea of the Eucharist. He knew that Christ is the life of the christian and he who receives Communion must bear fruit, fruit that lasts.

It is not surprising, then, to see him enumerate the 'fruits' that he almost demanded of his boys: "Overcome human respect, detach your hearts from earthly things and bring them to love that which is heavenly." As well, Don Bosco himself was to confess later on that Holy Communion "was the most vital support of my vocation" (*MO*, page 91). At the end of his life, he was to write in his spiritual testament: "I always found most efficacious the Communion of our boys" (*MB XVIII*,261). On his deathbed, he asked those around about him: "Promise me you will love each other as brothers . . . Recommend frequent Communion" (*MB XVIII*,501). For him, Communion must be prepared for by charity and must lead us to a deeper and more heartfelt love. Having received this message from the dying lips of Don Bosco, we seem to have received a most important aspect of his Eucharistic theology.



## Chapter Six

### Marian Catechesis of Don Bosco

In his Marian catechesis, Don Bosco began with the principle that devotion to the Madonna is the support of every christian, but, in a special manner, of the young. This devotion gives the young a certain sense of stability, of commitment, and of security that they so often lack. Because of his concrete approach to things, he did not get involved in theological disputations or in lengthy reasonings. In his pastoral catechesis he especially insisted on directing young people towards a practical and filial devotion and to a limitless trust in the Virgin. It can be said (and the comment was made as regards his Eucharistic catechesis) that Don Bosco aimed at a practical, concrete devotion. He could even be accused of teaching a utilitarian form of devotion, almost equating prayers said with graces received (cf. *MB* XIII, 578). Or at least, this is the impression he sometimes gives.

However, it must be stated that Don Bosco was content with the bare essentials of theology, of which he had more than a sufficient knowledge, to serve as the foundation for the devotions he taught. Here it is well to note, too, the influence his own mother had on him and how this came into his Marian devotion. To him, orphaned at an early age, his mother signified everything that was good, understanding, gentle and forgiving and her influence upon him would be difficult to over-estimate. He showed forth in his own life and stressed continuously in his catechetics that recourse to the Virgin was an essential part of christian



living. It became, for Don Bosco, a 'wing' that carried young people to untold heights. It was a theologically correct devotion and one that was psychologically valid. All the long series of triduums, feasts, novenas, practices of piety to which he exposed his boys every year were for Don Bosco the best occasions to sensitize them and stimulate them "through love of Mary" or "in honour of Mary" to a more concrete and committed christianity (cf. *MB* VIII,20-24; 435-437).

His catechetical style was to lead his boys to a real friendship with Christ. But because "all good things of the Lord come to us by means of Mary" it follows as a logical consequence that "it is almost impossible to go to Jesus except through Mary" (*MB* VII,405-407). Marian devotion thus became a short-cut, the quickest and most reliable, to God's love. For the young Mary is a guide, a teacher and a mother. It is not possible not to derive these concepts from Don Bosco's own experience, from his first prophetic dream when the Madonna burst into his life and planned out for a lifetime of initiatives.

The saint's Marian catechesis is governed by the role that Mary plays in everyone's salvation. This is the refrain that keeps on being repeated all throughout his catechetical work.

Salvation is not something that is thrown at people but it presupposes a committed and coherent christian life. Devotion to Mary is not only a "valid support" for the innate weakness and fickleness of young people but it is also a "comfort," and it represents "one of the safest means to attain to eternal life."

Don Bosco knew quite well that the reward of glory is in proportion to the efforts and commitment shown in life. And for him there was no better indication of true devotion than to keep clear of sin, to be involved in the apostolate, to keep passions under control, to celebrate the Madonna's feasts fervently. In a word, to "fly from all that is evil, and do all that is good for the love of Mary."

And so Don Bosco's Marian catechesis stimulated the youth to examine his life, comparing it to that of Mary seen as the Immaculate or invoked as the Help of Christians. Again it was in this field that his best boys were the ones who understood best his Marian catechesis.



Michael Magone refined his holiness by his Marian devotion. Fr. Caviglia claims that Michael "among those saintly boys proposed by Don Bosco as models in writing their lives, could be singled out for his devotion to Mary. Magone is a specialist in Marian devotion." Michael not only looked upon Mary as a model but, out of filial concern, he tried not to displease his Mother and in her honour committed himself to a life of sacrifice and detachment.

Dominic Savio made of his life "an exercise of devotion to Mary, most Holy." His (or probably at least compiled under the influence and review of Don Bosco), is the 21st Article of the Sodality of Mary Immaculate, in which, alongside a delicate yet strong devotion to Mary, is to be noted a courageous programme of christian living with no half-measures: "A sincere filial and unlimited faith in Mary, a most tender devotion to her; a constant devotion that makes us superior to any obstacle, tenacious in our resolution, stern with ourselves, gentle with our neighbour and exact in everything."

Don Bosco demanded commitment and fidelity from everyone. Relying on the popular piety of the faithful he invited, in a booklet published in 1858, all his readers to make a triple commitment: to do everything possible so as not to commit a single sin during the whole month dedicated to Mary: to set about doing all one's duties as exactly as possible: to try and get both family and friends to take part in the Marian practices during the month. Here we find, without doubt, a commitment on both a personal and community level.

Speaking of Don Bosco it is only right to use Fr. Desramaut's expression: "Mary was around him everywhere" (*Don Bosco and the Spiritual Life*, page 86). One cannot understand his life without taking notice of the notable presence of the Madonna.

In this regard, the influence of Mamma Margaret is vital. From her life little John learned to say the Angelus and the Rosary. She it was who advised him so often to choose as his friends those devoted to the Madonna. His Marian devotion, which kept on growing richer and more heartfelt, took on from time to time new nuances according to the place where he was working, from the different circum-



stances or historical events through which he lived. So a whole series of dates could be set down which cover the whole of his life.

Between 1820 and 1841 Don Bosco made his the devotions proper to Castelnovo, Chieri and Turin: Our Lady of the Rosary, Our Lady of the Castle, the Virgin of the Stairs, Our Lady of Sorrows, the Consolata.

From 1841 to 1858 he was sensibly attracted to devotion to the Immaculate. He felt the influence of the Mariological movement that was authoritatively confirmed by Pius IX with the proclamation of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception and by the Virgin herself with the apparitions at Lourdes four years later. Alongside these historical-theological factors there is another component which is the irresistible attraction the saint had for the virtue of purity, either in itself as for the boys with whom he came into daily contact and of whose struggles and falls he was a witness.

In the years from 1858 to 1868 a new factor surfaces: The devotion to the Immaculate which from 1841 (from the beginning of the Salesian work) was the principle Marian devotion. This now assumes a new dimension: the Madonna begins to be honoured under the double and historically apt title of Immaculate Help of Christians. The motives that had suggested this new form of Marian catechesis are not at all clear. There is, without doubt, a species of illumination from on high (cf. *MB* VII,334), but there are other factors which slowly influenced this transformation. Above all, devotion to Mary, Help of Christians was known all over Piedmont, but especially in Turin, much earlier than 1862, with many associations and devotees depending on that set up in Munich (Bavaria). In addition, there was a second reason to be found in the changed political conditions which, passing from a shallow enthusiasm for Pius IX and the Church developed into a bitter opposition. The Help of Christians appeared in Don Bosco's life just when he was convinced that "it is not merely a matter of making the tepid fervent, of the converting of sinners, of preserving the innocent . . . but the very Catholic Church is under siege" (Preface to the *Marvels of the Mother of God*).

Into this historical-ecclesial perspective was inserted the direct intervention of Pius IX. Fr. Broccado affirms



this very strongly and we have taken several points from his study: *San Giovanni, apostolo*. As well as this, Don Bosco makes an explicit reference to this factor (*Marvels of the Mother of God*, pages 100,106,119).

In his Marian catechesis the saint took another step. When the Basilica was finished in 1868 he separated the two terms of the Immaculate and Help of Christians. Whilst not disregarding the first altogether he certainly laid much more stress on the second. Note what Fr. Desramaut says (*Don Bosco and the Spiritual Life*, page 89):

"It is necessary to add that his devotion to Mary, Help of Christians over the last 25 years of his life did not displace his devotion to the most loving Mother, the Immaculate Conception. According to the circumstances, he found in Mary all that his soul desired; the wheel-spring of life, a model not to be equalled and a victorious source of strength." His experience, his priestly ministry, his daily contact with young people, convinced Don Bosco that he should present the Madonna as the mother of youth. Mothers, reasoned the saint, are instinctively drawn towards their smallest children. They see them innocent and want to defend them. The Madonna, he continued, loves young people because she sees in them at this age the adolescent Christ who lived with her at Nazareth (cf. *MB XVI*,284). For this reason, in his youth pastoral ministry, he presented the Immaculate as an ideal model and the Help of Christians as a reliable guide on life's journey. He understood the actuality of presenting Mary "as a help who shared our human nature." He did not divorce this devotion from its christological context but presented her in a way that was traditional, roman and catholic. Therefore he saw Marian devotion in a wider context of the social and public work for the Church and the Pope as for the simple faithful. In an interview with a journalist from the *Journal de Rome* in 1884, Don Bosco was asked: "What do you think of the conditions of the Church in Europe and in Italy?" He parried the question by saying that he was not a prophet, but then concluded: "My forecast is a very gloomy one but I am not at all afraid. God will always protect His Church, and the Madonna, who visibly protects today's world, will know how to raise up saviours" (*MB XVII*,86). Here his faith in the protective intervention of the



Madonna shines out but, not for this, does he passively renounce the collaboration of man.

The immediate successors of Don Bosco, like Don Rua and Don Albera, take up these ideas which they had imbibed by living with him for so many years and re-affirmed the urgency of Marian devotion.

"Our unforgettable father and founder Don Bosco continually stressed the fact that devotion to the Madonna would be our greatest glory in life and our greatest consolation in heaven" Don Rua: *Circular Letters*, pages 452-453. Don Albera, in his *Circular Letters*, pages 270-437 writes: "For Don Bosco the Help of Christians came first in all his thoughts and was the object of each and every beat of his heart" and asked all Salesians "to become her fervent apostles" because "we are Don Bosco's sons and owe everything to her."



### *Conclusion*

#### **Elements of Actuality in Don Bosco's Pastoral Catechesis**

Having reached the conclusion of this study, we will attempt to point out those elements of Don Bosco's catechesis which are still valid today. It is necessary to make two premises. Above all, there are elements that cannot be handed on because they are directly tied up with his own person, his unique charism, to his personal work as a priest, apostle and saint. Yet, on the other hand, the actuality of Don Bosco cannot be circumscribed by the historical period in which he lived, to that dimension of time and place in which he carried on his work.

The particular vitality of his mission, the notable efficacy of the apostolate he inspired, the special charism of his ecclesial service make of Don Bosco a saint well defined in his century. Sent by God he exercised an essential and determining role in the Church on behalf of the young. He saw with new evangelical insight the material and spiritual problems of young people of this time (in so many ways so like our own!) and he sensed the dramatic urgency of action.

It is precisely in this consecration to a total and disinterested love for young people, we can pin-point the first and most important factor of actuality. It supplies the general climate in which he worked, the very approach which explains and gives value and sense to all his apostolate. It cannot be denied that Don Bosco had a particular vocation and mission for the world of the young.

Without forgetting all the other necessary aspects of



service within the Church, it seems that today the youth apostolate must have preferential priority. An apostolate that is occupied with those young people for whom Don Bosco had a special love: the poor and the abandoned. Not to single them out, not to make of them a distinct class, for that would not be just. But only to gather together in the one apostolate all those who, materially or spiritually, are poor and have need of someone who will search them out, care for them, love them.

There is a material poverty caused by insufficient economical means, by social insecurity, by insufficient education. But alongside this, and perhaps in a more dramatic form, there is a spiritual poverty due to ideological confusion, religious ignorance or indifference, by the collapse of moral values.

It is an apostolate of extreme actuality where young people on the outskirts of big cities or crowded together in working areas must not be forgotten. Nor should the young people in developing countries likewise be forgotten because it is there that poverty and abandonment are more evident and striking.

Don Bosco realized his mission by means of a pastoral catechesis in which were intermingled an intelligent and operative charity, a well-balanced evangelization and religious formation. In all this he made use of explicit and visibly powerful supernatural means: grace, prayer, sacraments, devotion to Our Lady, the *sensus ecclesiae*, undisputed solidarity with the Pope.

His style of evangelizing the poor was based on the evangelical mold of the Good Shepherd, his very presence an eloquent witness of the love of Christ.

His priestly service within the Church was not mere social assistance (Don Bosco reproached Don Cocchi for doing just this!) or a theoretical evangelization (as the Oratories of Milan and Rome, working with a very select band of followers) but a complete service in which, alongside material preoccupation and a concrete examination of the situation (cf. *MB* II, 45-8; 50-53), there was a pastoral catechesis that became essentially an evangelical work of liberation of youth from all forms of oppression. So his catechesis covered so many aspects, as we have already seen. He started off with



the young person where he found him and slowly led him towards an authentic human development. From here his preoccupation was to find employment, to make sure that a just wage was being paid and to prepare his lads for the socio-political conditions of the time—not to get them involved in a senseless class-struggle but to insert them into society by means of a constructive presence and the living out of a virile and christian maturity.

His catechetical work, almost a pre-evangelization, led up to an education to the right use of liberty and an appeal for authenticity (cf. *MB* IV,414). Hence to a battle against human respect and every form of deceit and dishonesty (cf. *MB* IV,305).

Don Bosco did not stop here. The “religious integration of goals” of which Don Braidò speaks was understood and courageously carried through by the saint who wanted to lead his boys to faith, through the annunciation of the Gospel, catechetics and, above all, by the witness of his own priestly life and deeply human friendship.

We feel we can discover in this total consecration to the young the fundamental element of Don Bosco’s catechesis.

Parallel to this, and this study has tried to prove this, we must recognize another aspect of actuality in his catechetical method, his established goals and means to reach them. Faced with the growing process of secularization, the young person of today needs to be “re-catechised.” It is here that Don Bosco preserves all his actuality.

He did not reduce catechetics to teaching only, to a transmission of notions and dry formulae. Nor was his catechetics confined to the religion period in school or a homily or even in a conference or discussion. It was all this; indeed it was the essential moment of all his pastoral activity, in which, by presenting Christ as always very near to a young person, he exercises and continues the prophetic mission of the Son of God. Fidelity to man, of which recent catechetical documents speak, consisted for Don Bosco in knowing a young person and his real problems, in an examination of his family situation so as to better understand and help him. Not a mere offering of general solutions but a giving of a concrete response to concrete problems.

To be faithful and close to man, another actual aspect of



his catechesis, means living with the young, belonging to them, in the sense of being fully available and open, even to setting up of a sincere and constructive dialogue, based on a real effective rapport that initiates mutual trust and the complete dedication of one's existence for him. Don Bosco respected the person, the boy, his liberty but all based on a concrete human reality. To be faithful to a boy means above all to bring out all his latent potential for a more fruitful openness to grace; to immerse the adolescent and the boy in the marvellous christian adventure. To be faithful to a young person means, in its ultimate analysis, to be faithful to a plan, individual and unique, that God has for the boy, without forcing the pace, but giving the person the trust that he merits, opening him up to a closer and closer friendship with Christ.

Finally, another important element of actuality was the widespread and intelligent use of the signs of grace. Even today Don Bosco would continue to insist on the frequentation of the sacraments because, today as yesterday, the young person needs to find Christ under the sacramental signs. And his catechetical methodology, whilst making the changes necessary for new times and circumstances, would not depart very far from his way of acting a century ago. Today he would insist upon the conversion that the sacrament of penance must work. I don't think he would accept certain showy forms of community confession. Yes, without doubt, he would stress the social aspect of sin and, therefore, of confession. But he would never forget the essential acts of the penitent, his private accusation, sincerely put forth and accompanied by a generous resolution to change his way of living.

Christ was of yesterday and today. His continual presence amongst us is guaranteed by His Real Eucharistic presence.

Don Bosco, always concrete and practical, would carry on his battle for Communion; but not any sort of Communion, without progress in virtue or with a heart continually poor and lacking in generosity. Don Bosco would keep insisting upon frequent Communion, creating occasions and demanding from the young a full availability for the love of Christ. As in the last century, so today the young person, bombarded by so much evil which is hostile and organized,



finds in the Eucharist contact, light and strength.

For Don Bosco a well-made Communion was a "feast-day." We are certain on this point, whilst centering Communion in the Paschal Mystery of the Lord, Dead and Risen, he would continue to favour it by all means available.

In the actual growing climate of socialization he would certainly interest his boys in the great missionary question, just as a century ago he knew how to foment a wave of incredible interest for the various expeditions promoted by him to Latin America.

Even in the strictly catechetical field, whilst introducing new schemes and initiatives, Don Bosco, I feel, would continue to be actual. He would certainly base his work upon some of the key-points of his system: love of the young, without which no real work can be done; knowledge and use of the latest techniques for presenting the Gospel message; a pedagogical and psychological preparation adapted to the times; the witness of convinced living, such as to transfer the catechized into apostles and to arouse in the listeners a slow progressive christian maturation.



















